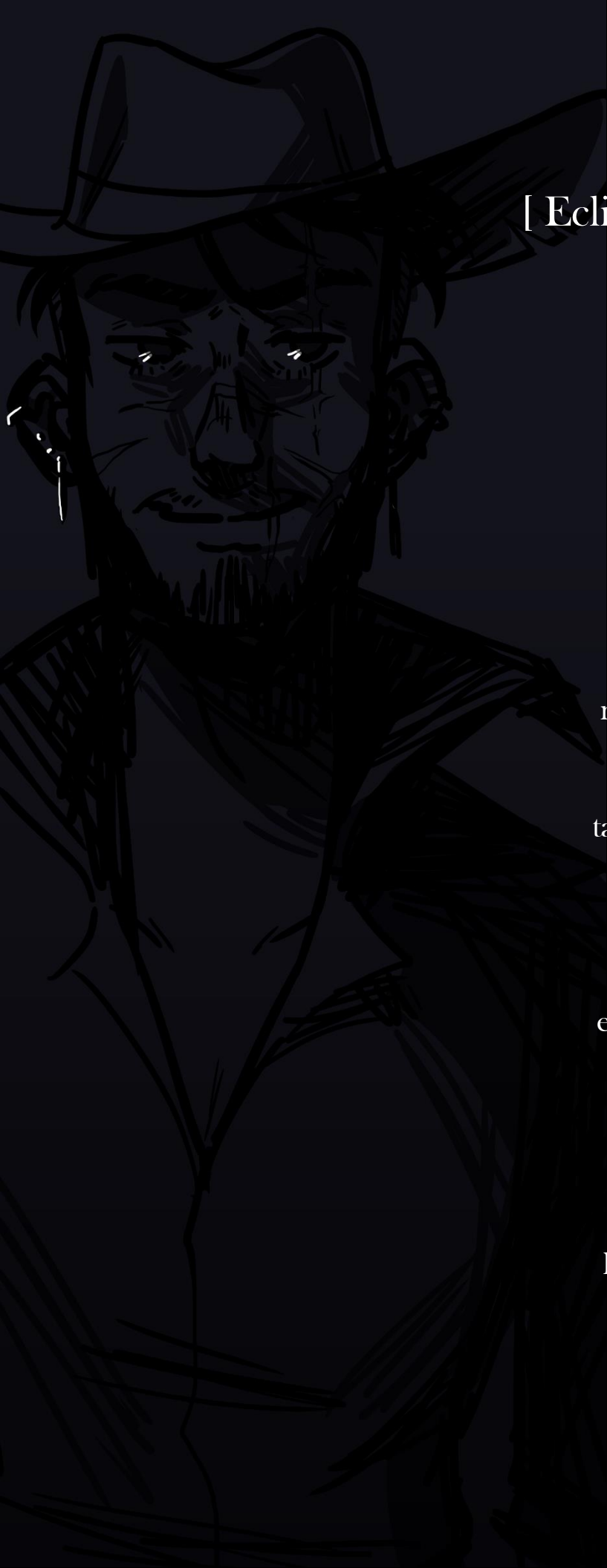


[ECLIPSE]
an MSPA fanzine.





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This zine is in no way official and is free for
download and viewing.

Please keep in mind that there *are* depictions
of blood, violence and similar themes within
the pieces of this zine.

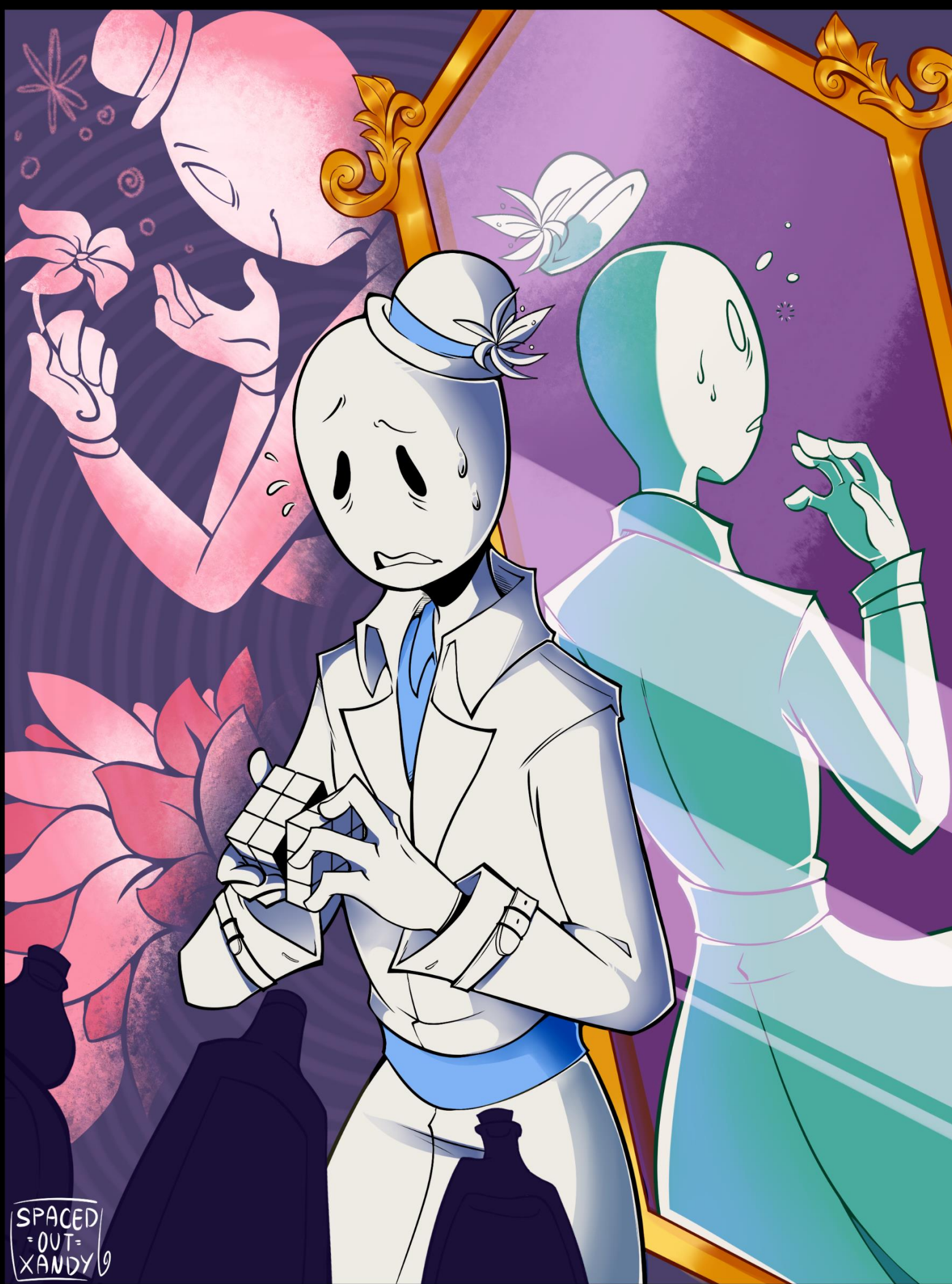
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PROBLEM SLEUTH

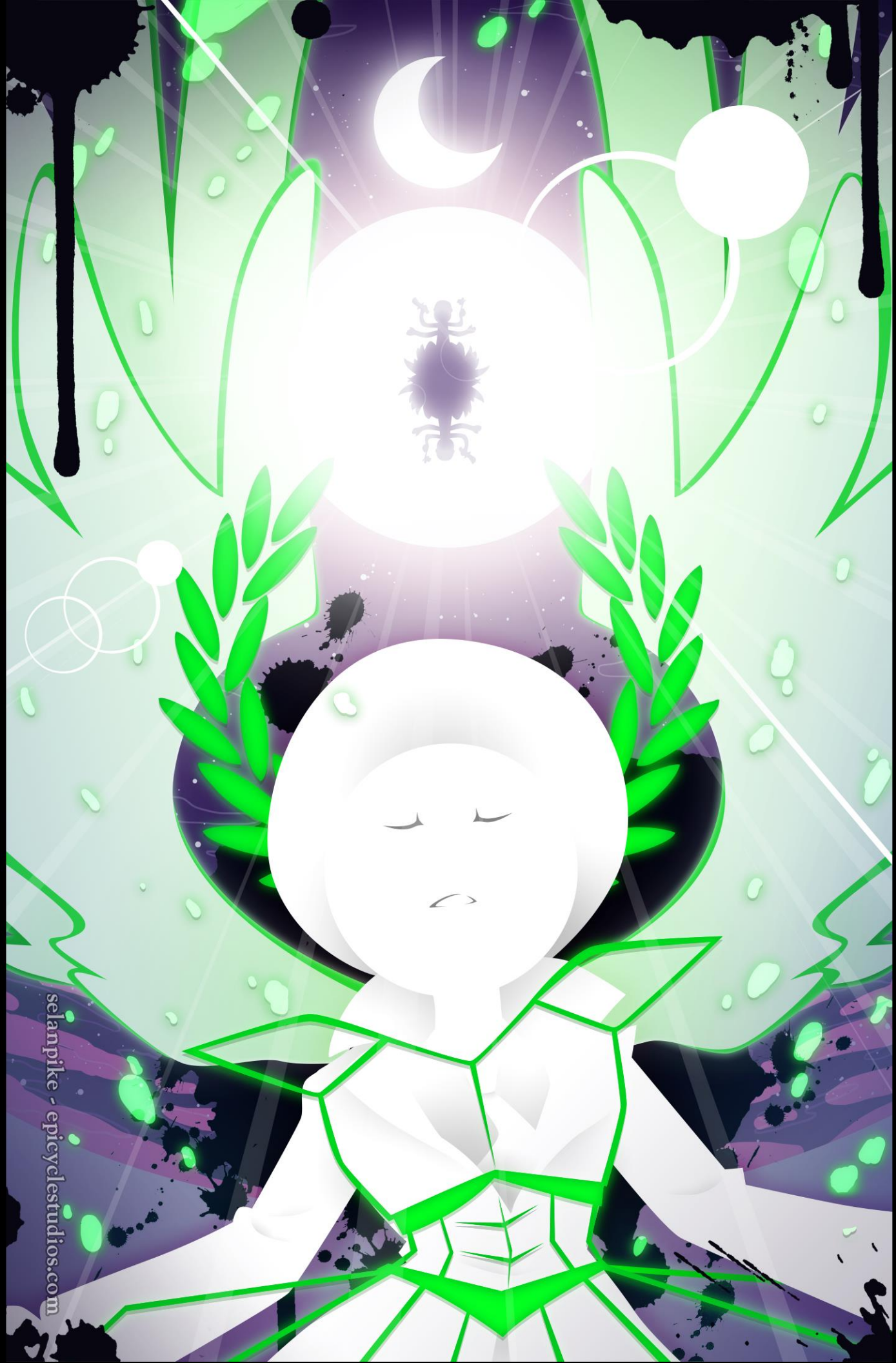
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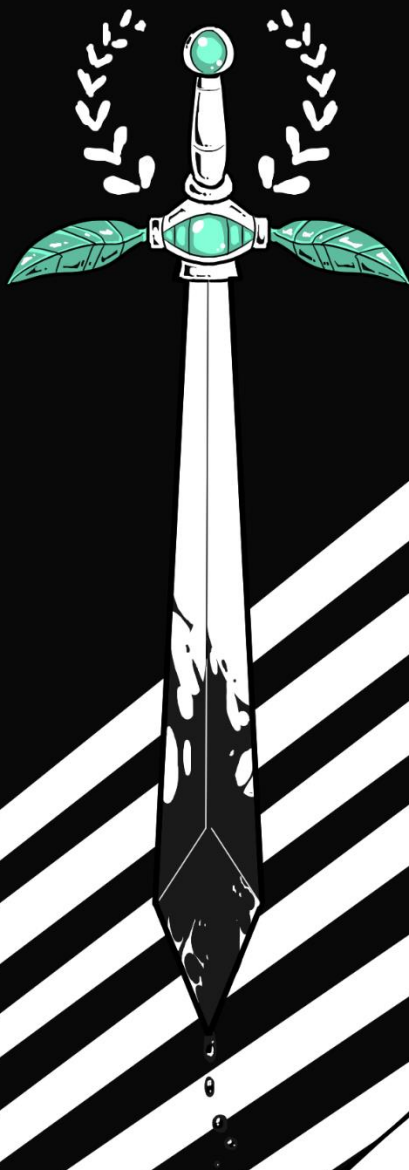












*See what all the
BUZZ is about!*

*When they don't have a
STRAPPING YOUNG MAN
to help them out of a jam...*

*DAMES PREFER
the smooth
action of a*

*Hysterical
chainsaw*



*"Get your gal the
cosmetic accessory
that gets the job done!"*





KeyMaster







THE FELT

*Ah, right
on
cue.*











tena/14/2020



ft 2020







GLASSESBLU







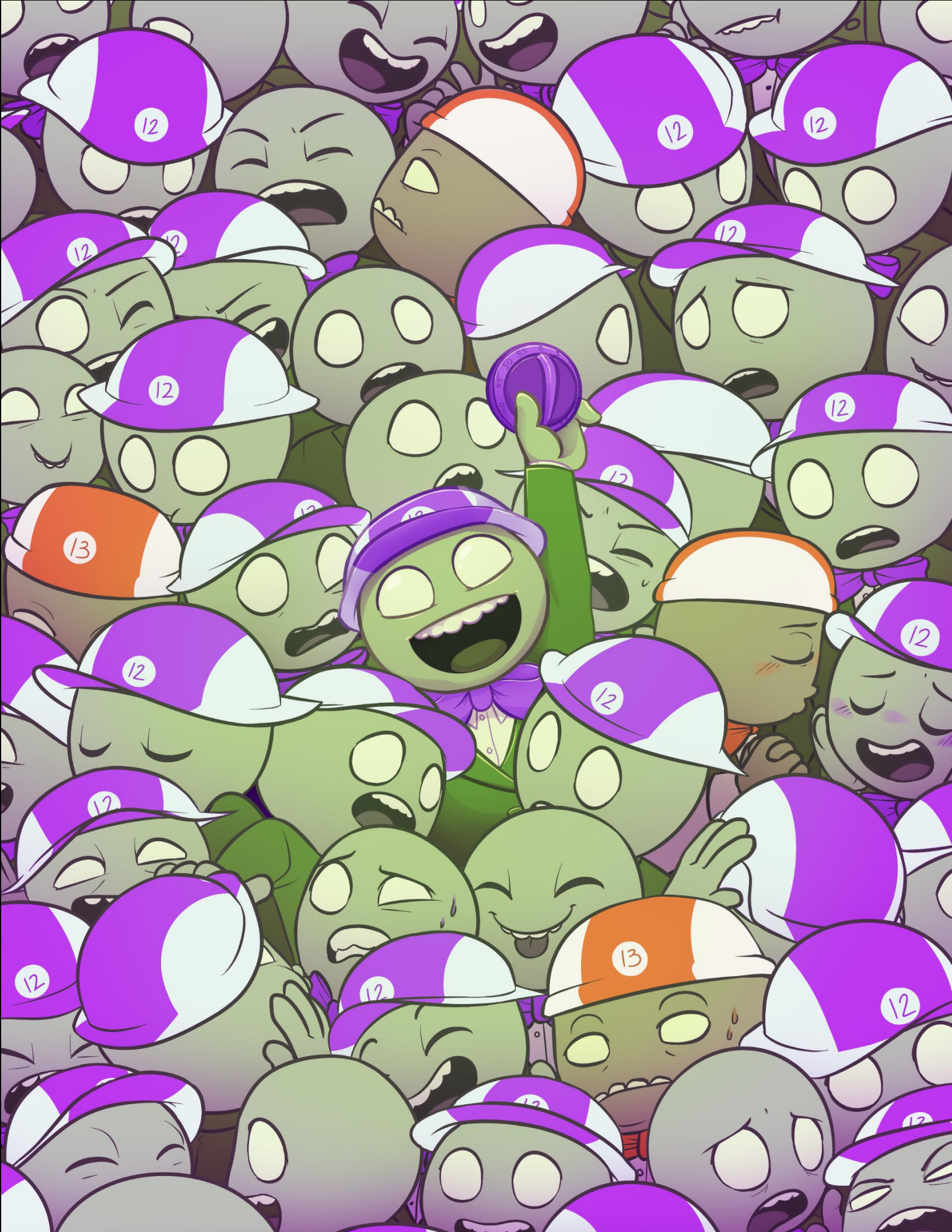




Jan 2020







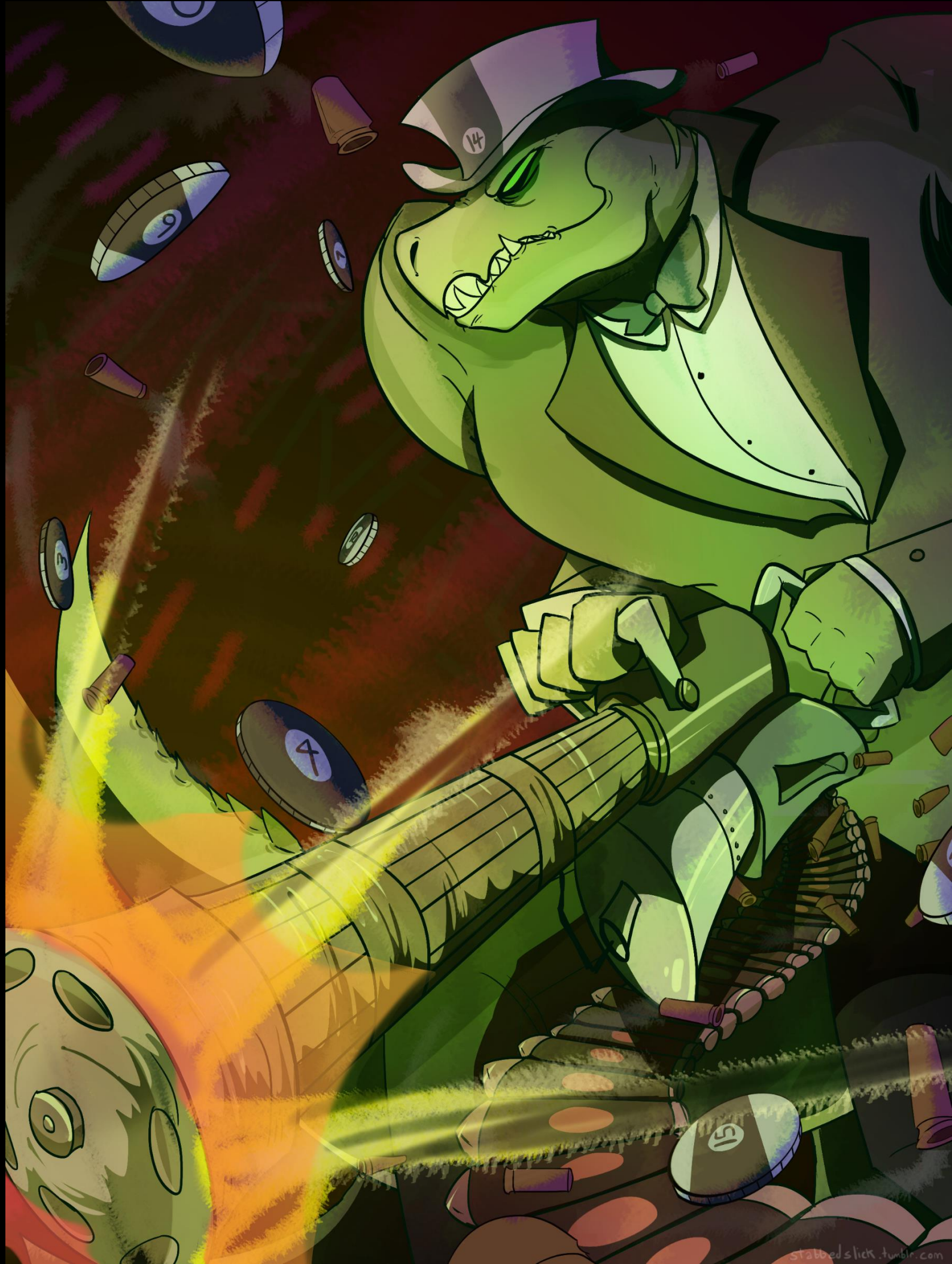
BISCUITS
BAKES
BISCUITS!



BISCUITS!
HE'S WAITING
FOR HIS
BISCUITS!

BISCUITS
COMPLETE!







THE MIDNIGHT CREW



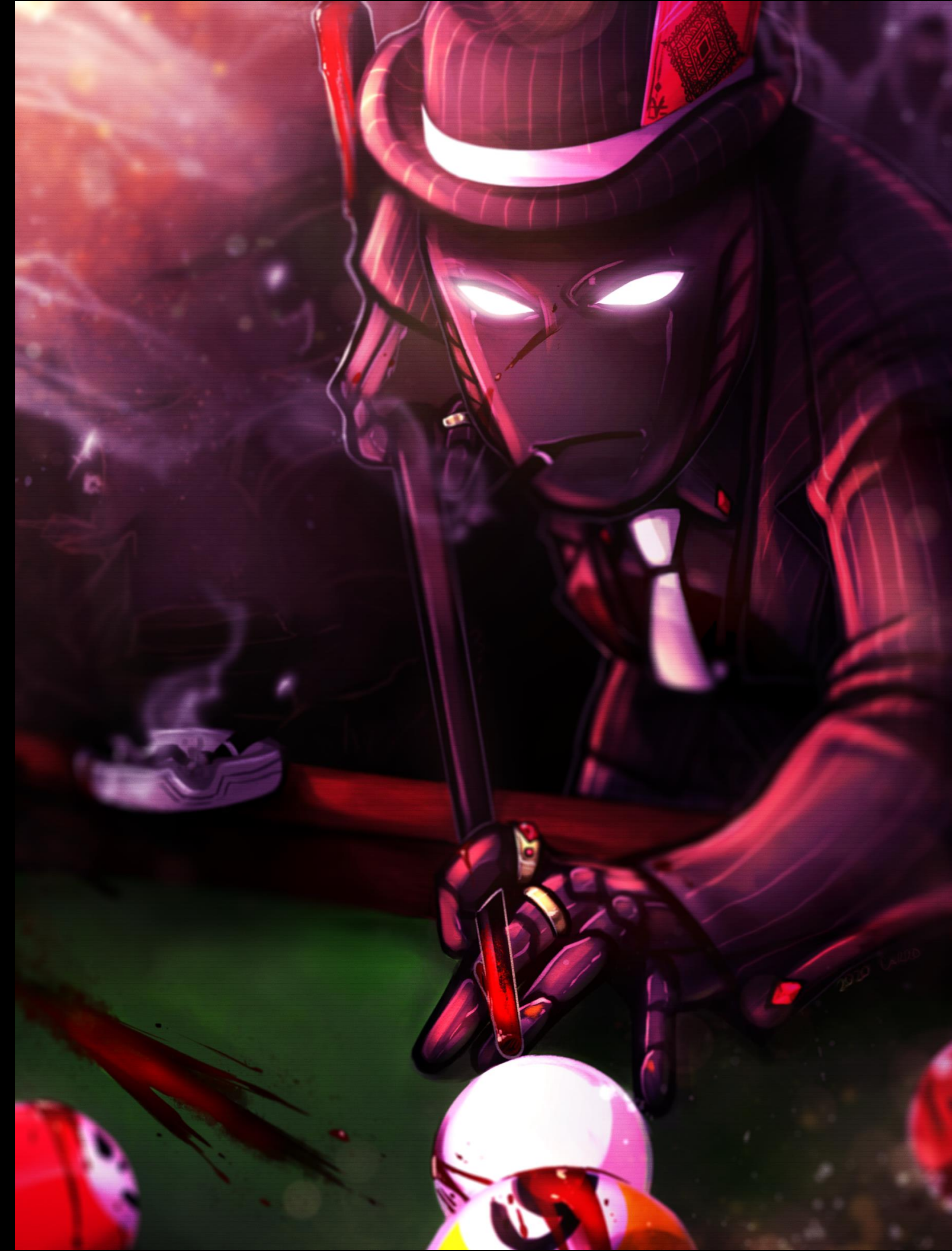
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Art by [signature]

S/H/20



The Chicken or the Egg

by ashford2ashford

Pickle Inspector muses on his two associates and ponders the really important questions.

Your name is Pickle Inspector and, honestly, now that you've been forced to think about it, you're not sure what came first: the chicken or the egg.

Part of you knows, deep down in your core, that Mr Sleuth was merely using it for metaphorical purposes, but the turn of phrase always struck you as odd. You've never been one to shy away from a random thought that happens to become ensnared in the net that occasionally catches a coherent idea within your mind. Even that is a metaphor that you've always struggled with. Nets have holes, which can only mean that for every thought you do manage to capture, there's a multitude of ones that have managed to slip through the gaps. Or have been missed entirely.

Another tangent to be mused upon another day.

Now, when Problem Sleuth (he certainly does cause more problems than he solves - at least in the office anyway) asked what came first, it certainly was with the impassive shrug that would imply the question was rhetorical. The way he adjusted his hat afterwards made you question if it was a question that even had an answer. Naturally, the sly smirk that followed even that slight motion made you question yourself: was this something you should have been overthinking?

Further questions.

Ones that make you dive down deep inside yourself and become lost following so many threads without anything to tie them onto. You think too hard - that's what Mr Ace insists - and musing on such tripe only gives you reason to pause and not act. Then again, these were not exactly the sorts of questions that required any further action on your part.

Purely rhetorical.

Before you can swim deeper and ultimately drown in your own thoughts, you are snapped out of your own personal bubble by a meaty fist slamming down on a desk. Scratch that: two fists.

Problem Sleuth is laughing to himself in that usual raucous manner, slapping his knee with one hand for emphasis on exactly how funny this joke inside his mind is, the other arm over his stomach as though preventing his sides from splitting any more than they apparently have. Ace Dick is grinding his teeth and baring them in a brutish - almost feral - display of dominance, both hands curled into fists on the surface of his desk. Cracks creep out cautiously from beneath them, almost daring to sneak a peek at the outside world, as one hand lifts and gestures in your general direction.

"Stop flappin' your gums! You know that'll get him diggin' at the wrong stuff! Moron doesn't need anything else cloggin' his drain!" It would appear both of your fellow detectives are talking about you rather than to you. Anything Ace says in your defence only serves to make Sleuth laugh harder.

Wiping away imaginary tears, your self-proclaimed, fearless, hard-boiled leader straightens his posture and breathes an over dramatic sigh of relief. Only now does he look in your direction and beams widely, "Hey hey. Sorry, pal. I couldn't help it. You can practically see your eyes glazin' over, Pickles. Was just a little fun."

"It...it's fine. I do often get..." You search for the right words, but conversation only allows you a precious few seconds to think, "...caught up in my thoughts."

When prompted, you can talk. You know this. Sleuth knows this. Ace knows this. Out of the three who make up your rag-tag detective team, you are the only one who bothered to fill any of the nodes in your Etiquette Monstrance with mannercite shards. Polite and precise in manner. The epitome of do unto others as you would want done unto you.

However, Sleuth has a habit of using his wit and sheer gumption to make you look like a stammering and yammering idiot.

You do not particularly care for that. No sir.

Idly, you cast your mind back a little, to previous days in the office. Almost slipping into a daze whilst doing so, tuning out the sounds of Sleuth and Ace yammering on in the background, you remember that old office - long before the wall was broken in to expand it into the larger space for the three of you. A simpler time. Held back only by the physical limitations of the real world, you were more than capable of spending many a minute - hour - day? - exploring the depths of the imagination realm. Four neat walls. Nothing but a fan, a plywood desk, three jars and a tea set.

On a physical level, you were poor, malnourished, and could hardly lift even a hairpin. Spiritually? Powerful.

Despite the outside appearance (normal, I believe the term is), your imagination was left to run wild on the outer plane. You'd skip through life snug inside your fort, having everything your mind could possibly beg for at your disposal. If you didn't want to talk, you'd simply dismiss the image from your mind and it would be fixed in an instant. No meaningless conversation for you, no sir!

No rough curses spat from the mouth of a short and angry brawler; no snarky and wise-ass remarks to everything that was said. Only you and your fort and the silence and the days and the ever present threat of next month's rent and -

Perhaps you were missing something; missing something that seems to crawl into your passive hearing range and begins to coax you back to reality from the depths of memory.

"And then I said -" Already unravelling the threads of another conversation, Sleuth draws you out of your internal solitude, causing you to blink rapidly for a few seconds.

Far from his barking laughter of before, his voice has taken on a rhythmic quality, the story he is weaving beginning to tangle you up within it. There's no denying that Sleuth can be a powerful speaker when he puts his mind to it, but he prefers to save that particular skill for when he wants something. Or for when he is recounting one of his slightly taller tales for the amusement of both Ace and yourself.

In a way, you are privileged to be his friend. Sleuth might seem like everything he does is either black, white, or downright morally grey, but you've seen far beyond that in your years together as a team (his team). If prompted, he'd brag about his own perceived hard-boiled nature, and speak highly of his very rough attempts at diplomacy. Without prompting, he would fill a room with mindless chatter, converse on any subject his mind happened to fancy at the given time, wax lyrical regardless of topic and still have enough in him to fight tooth and nail should the conversation ever take a downward spiral.

There's definitely a reason that he leads the team. No one who has ever met him can deny that there's something behind the twinkle in his eyes, backed up by the natural charisma in his smile. When GPI handed out his gifts to his creations, he certainly blessed Sleuth with enough pulchritude to turn any situation on its head (for both positive and negative sides of the scale at times).

But you've also seen him upset. You've seen him cry. You've seen him at his most gentle, stable, arrogant, cocky, happy, sad, proud and - plenty of other descriptors. He's comforted you when you've hurt so badly that it felt like you could no longer stand. Hand on your shoulder, elbow on your coat sleeve, fingertips making some form of contact to guide you back into the present. You've seen that side that no one else gets to see. A diamond. A precious jewel. A rarity that you treasure with all your heart.

A dear friend.

And then, in an instant, after all is said and done and he has recovered enough to take control of the situation once more, he can be...

How would Ace Dick put it?

...an asshole.

In fact, caught in that moment's reverie of all things Sleuth, you forget that there is one other to your happy trio until fist hits desk with enough force to send ripples through the air, scattering paper across the floor.

"Read my lips, I got two words for ya. Bull-fucking-shit!" Honestly, it's almost terrifying how accurate your assessment of Ace can be. At present, he leans over the desk, pointing at his mouth, annunciating every syllable carefully as though it requires the utmost effort.

Naturally, Sleuth sets upon him immediately, grin widening at the reaction he draws out of the stout squat male. Sensing a weakness, he aims for the throat straight away, right into the jugular, "I mean, that's three, but you get points for counting that far unaided-"

"Don't! Don't fuckin' say anything else! Don't you even think it! Keep those gums from flappin'! I'll sock you square in the jaw! I mean it! Hey - are you laughing? You goddamn punk! I'll -" You don't hear what Ace threatens, already considering the fact that you now exist in the same breathing space as the notorious Ace Dick without requiring an ambulance.

Once upon a time (goodness, a long time now you think back that far), Ace was merely one of three detectives in three separate offices who completely made your blood boil. Well, cool in fact - unlike Sleuth, you lack the vim to stay mad for long, and sooner or later you tend to just become incredibly disappointed rather than angry.

Ace Dick made you feel so utterly disappointed in the world, that you often spared a particular nasty thought that his only saving grace was that he could breathe unaided. Sometimes.

And yet, much like Sleuth, he has grown on you like a particularly aggressive strain of fungus. Not in your wildest dreams could you have ever imagined those hands being used for anything peaceful (and you certainly have the imagination indeed), but you have had the privilege of feeling a hand clasped upon the small of your back in victory and you have felt unbelievably safe when it was there. You've seen the way his mouth turns up slightly at one corner when you have found a new lead for a presumably cold case; how proud he looks in that moment and how...almost fatherly he can be.

When he shakes his head at Sleuth, there is a small part of it that seems to be almost like a parent scolding a child. Then again, you know he's been a father before. In some distant reality.

He's older than both Sleuth and yourself, but is hardly wiser.

In fact, he's not an intelligent sort at all - one who would rather use fists to solve a problem than his brain - but you still find ways to admire that sheer confidence in his own strength. Ace Dick makes up for what the team lacks. He is your muscle. A wall. A shield. A brawler. A fighter not a thinker. Sometimes, you need that to balance out the overwhelming charisma of Sleuth and the overactive imagination of your own brain.

Thinking back on it, the only thing that was remotely plan-shaped to come from Ace's mind (that you can remember) was him trapping you inside your office all those years ago.

You frown.

That was hardly gentlemanly. What had even prompted that? It wasn't like you ever sought to trap him in his office, so why had he gone above and beyond the usual level of petty?

And then it hits you: the memory. The reason.

Before you can stop yourself, you laugh out loud, prompting your two other office dwelling associates to turn and gaze at you. Sleuth has his gun out in mid-threat, kneeling over Ace's desk, trying to pull himself away from the large meaty hand that has scrunched up the front of his coat; Ace is the owner of said hand, his other fist raised as though he is about to knock the stuffing out of Problem Sleuth's face, mouth open as though he was caught pre-insult.

Both visibly relax, Sleuth even managing a smile as he slides off the desk (an actual desk and not cinder blocks or plywood), brushing imaginary dust from his coat as he straightens himself. Ace sits back in his chair and shakes his head, arms folded, mouth also turning up at the corners (Ace doesn't smile so much as less snarl).

"What's tickled you? You don't usually laugh at our scraps." Sleuth seems more at ease having witnessed your mirth.

"I...I was just remembering something." A blush staining your cheeks, you respond softly, somewhat embarrassed at being caught up in a thought, "Do you remember when Mr Ace locked me in my office? I suddenly remembered why he did that. It made me think of how...petty we all were, but also how apt that punishment was."

"The reason why you were locked in your office?" Sleuth ponders. He shrugs. "I ain't got a clue."

Ace scrunches up his face, stuck in what can only be considered a thought, sweat beginning to form on his brow slightly. "Damn...not even I can remember that."

"Like you were expected to, dumbass." In an almost disappointed manner, Sleuth leans on his desk, "Go on, Pickles, I'll bite: why did Ace lock you in your office?"

Suddenly put on the spot, you wring your hands nervously, afraid that these two would not see the humour in the situation like you can. "I...ah...well...I used to think that he was showing off with all of the wealth he had, so I started sneaking out of my office to syphon his liquor. He found out and trapped me in my office to make a point."

Ace's face lights up suddenly. To your surprise, he actually barks out in a manner that is unmistakably a laugh, "Oh yeah! You sly bastard! I remember that! You were damn sneaky for doing that! Pretty ballsy too. I remember that your fucking notes sucked. You were not good at insulting people at all!"

At the mention of the notes, Sleuth's face lights up, "Oh damn! Those passive aggressive notes! I actually still have those!"

It's your turn to be surprised, "You do?"

"Yeah! Check this shit out." As though it requires little effort, Sleuth lightly hops over his desk (he could just walk around it, but no, he's got to show off in some fashion at all times) and opens a draw, pulling out an envelope full to the brim with notes.

Both Ace and yourself move around to join him as he scatters a stack of notes, posters, pictures and other items across the desk. Sleuth seems so proud of himself, "The only note I couldn't get was the one I peed on. Like hell I was gonna keep that!"

"I thought it smelled weird!" Ace growls at him, only half threatening a row, more interested in a small post-it note that reads - in your neat cursive writing: **ACE DICK IS NOT A NICE PERSON AND HIS COAT IS FROM A DOLLAR STORE (NOT THAT THERE'S ANYTHING WRONG WITH THAT, BUT IN THIS CASE IT'S AN INSULT BECAUSE YOU SPEND SO MUCH MONEY ON LITERALLY EVERYTHING)!**

Sleuth laughs hard at that, also pulling out a business card that has an awful pencil drawing of himself upon it with the words: **PROBLEM SLEUTH'S COAT IS POORLY LAUNDERED.**

"Oh GPI. Pickles. What even were these?" Wiping away even more imaginary tears, Sleuth chuckles, "You are God-awful at insultin' people."

You are: it's true.

As Ace and Sleuth both dig through the piles of insults (some far better than others), you find yourself staring at them both once more - at these two men who have made your life simultaneously difficult and incredible in equal measure.

You were enemies.

There was a time when the mere mention of those two names was enough to fill you with dread, but now you actively associate with them.

For a moment - yes, for an actual moment - you cherish this sight.

Ace is laughing hard at a ridiculous picture he drew of Sleuth. There are wrinkles on his face from years of hard work and street fighting. His nose is broken in places, scars on his lips, eyes sunken in, and yet he looks so happy in this scene playing out in front of you. Crows feet at the corners of his eyes. Jowls jiggling with every deep boom of laughter.

Bent over double, tears streaming from his eyes in happiness, literally crying with laughter, Sleuth points out that Ace spelled the word 'ASSHOLE' wrong on one of the cards. At the sides of his temples, his hair is starting to grey slightly; a light peppery dust upon blond strands.

Green eyes glitter with mischief, shining in the light, yet showing the slight tiredness around the corners that comes with this line of work.

These are your business partners. These are your closest friends. These are the two men who make it worthwhile to be in the world of reality rather than imagination.

Eventually, after much reminiscing on all of your parts, the box of notes now stashed away in its usual place, Sleuth idly pats his pockets down and pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He makes a motion to the door and heads out, Ace joining him shortly with a cigar neatly clipped at the end, leaving the office. Fresh air is certainly needed after a good laugh, but you would rather not face the world today.

Left alone with your thoughts (and a previously discarded stack of paperwork).

Idly, you daydream, quiet and calm, your mind turning the cogs within your head slowly. Several thoughts filter through as you allow your brain to stretch itself further. Wandering through an endless field of memory and every question and case that was left unanswered and unsolved. It is no difficulty to you. Not in the slightest.

Within, the only sound is the pen that you are using to jot said thoughts down. From outside, you hear the idle conversations of the streets, cars rattling by, the general noise of the city seeming as though it is an appropriate background to your slow picking apart of conundrums aplenty. In the hallway beyond the door to the office there is more chatter and traffic of people coming and going.

Peaceful.

Dozing lightly, allowing the pen to fall upon the chicken-scratch of notes upon your desk, you begin to - hmm. Actually. That does bring about a good question.

Your eyes open wide, the sudden thought hitting you hard like a lightning strike: what did come first?

The chicken or the egg?

That's Why You Remember the Name

by David M. Briggs (halberdierminister)

Some folks are born to be good. Some folks are born to be bad. Some folks are born to be wild. Me?

I was born to sleuth problems.

It's right there in the name, see. Only the best professionals are named after their job. That's why when I need a dentist, I go to Tooth Pullman. Or when I need a doctor, I go to Obi G. Wyen. So when you need an issue investigated, a situation scrutinized or a conundrum considered, you sure don't wanna call Elle Ectrician. You wanna call the best in the business.

You wanna call Problem Sleuth.

I'm a private eye, as you damn well guessed, and you might even say I am considered one of the top oblique observers in the city. I am also, of course, cited as one of the sexiest men in the area code, am frequently referred to as one of the most eligible bachelors in the state congressional district, and am the recipient of four consecutive nominations for Discreet Detective Digest's Hardboiled Hunk of the Year Award. A reputation like that doesn't just pop up overnight. It gets developed through a lifetime of gumption, chutzpah, elbow grease and elf tears. There's a reason that solicitations for my assistance number significantly higher than some other, less pulchritudinous providers. I don't just give promises. I guarantee results.

A ring of the phone sets the needle down properly on the swing record of the night. I straighten my tie instinctively in order to loosen it properly, and I pick up the call for help.

P. Sleuth and Associates, I answer every time, and I add a little note that it is P. Sleuth himself speaking.

A voice responds. It's a voice I've never heard, not to my knowledge, and yet there is something there that seems tremendously, uncannily familiar. There's a tremor in the voice as they ask me, nearly breathless, if my refrigerator is running.

I tell them that's a tough question. Being as the setting has always played it fast and loose with the timeline, I can't say for sure if the refrigerator has been invented yet.

They tell me I'd better go catch it.

Well that's just the thing, ain't it? I put my feet up on the desk and tell them I'd love to catch it for them, I really would, but I can't just work with no clues to start from, can I? And I especially can't work for free. A fella has bills to pay and expensive gifts to buy for whoever he chooses to romance this week, and while charity work fills the soul, it doesn't fill the belly or the bed. So let's talk prices first, I tell them, and follow that up with everything we know about -- what was it again, toots? Ah yes -- my refrigerator.

Silence passes for some time between us, followed by what almost sounds like a sigh of disappointment and a click.

Typical cheapskate, hoping to take advantage of a good man's services for free. Well, I learned pretty quickly in this business not to freely service every Tom, Dick and Harry that walks in here, no sir.

Gotta pay to get serviced.

It's a living, as they say, and you gotta make a living. And I make my living on the edge of danger, lurking on the fringes of society, trimming off the split ends of inhumanity

and protecting the roots of mankind. Yes sir, if crime is the mullet of the city, I'm the barber who's going to do whatever it takes to shape this town into something actually presentable.

It's a tough life out in this town. This city was built from the ground up by mob money and corruption, and any sane man would take a look at his odds of making a difference and go back to quietly resuming a more reasonable profession. Like a garbage man. Or a sandwich artist. But as the old film says, I know right and I know wrong. And when you've been raised to know which is which, well, it's not something that ever leaves your mind.

Not to dwell on my childhood. It doesn't matter how I got here. What matters is that I am here. And I am not gonna just roll over at the first sign of an enforcer beating down my door to stick a gun in my face.

Coincidentally, as we speak, an enforcer has just beaten down my door and stuck a gun in my face.

But that's fine. I've been in worse scrapes than this. Hell, I've died at least a couple times when last I counted. You have to get up pretty early in the-- okay, he just poked me in the nose with it. I'd better say something.

I don't recall scheduling an appointment for this evening, I say to him. Spades Slick don't need no appointment, he says to me.

I look him up and down. Cheap suit, clip on tie, and a hat only one or two steps classier than cardboard. You don't look like Spades Slick to me, I say to him.

Yeah, but Spades Slick sent me, he says to me.

And in that goonie getup, you don't look like Diamonds Droog, I say to him. Yeah, that's right, I ain't Diamonds Droog, he says to me.

And studying your stature, you couldn't possibly be either Clubs Deuce or Hearts Boxcars, I say to him.

Yeah, I know, I ain't those cats neither, he says to me. So...

I'm a new guy, he says. New guy, I say.

New guy, he says.

His gun keeps brushing up against my nostril in a way that I feel he ought to know has got to be considered awfully impertinent in most cultures.

Well then, new guy, I say to him, how do you plan to shoot me with that... bus station locker key?

He makes a sound and turns the gun around to check and see if it really had turned into a bus station locker key, and in that moment I strike. A punch to his wrist, a knee to his bits, and in less than a few slick and cinematically pleasing moves, I've got him doubled over and in a headlock with his gun to his own chin.

I shoulda known you was tryin' to play me, he says. This thing only unlocks suitcases.

Oldest trick in the book, I tell him, and yet goons like you keep falling for it. Now tell me why you're here before I use it to unlock your wisdom teeth.

I told ya, he groans out, Spades Slick sent me.

Yeah, but what you haven't told me, I say to him, and what you should have inferred from context clues that I was actually asking, is why Spades Slick sent you?

I don't know, he says.

Not good enough, I say, and I bring my chokehold in significantly tighter. No, no! he chokes out, I mean I don't know beyond what I told you!

How do you figure, I ask him.

Easy! Spades Slick, he says to me, he says, 'Go give Problem Sleuth my regards,' and then just sorta sends me on my way. So I figure he wants me to paint your office in blood instead of... instead of...

Instead of what? I ask with a rather pointed jab of the gun.

Is that a mural? he asks, trying to nod his head at the masterpiece that covers my wall. So what if it is? I ask.

Well, nothing, he says, gasping for air, it's just really nice. You think so? I ask him.

Yeah, he says, struggling against my grip, it really conveys a sense of peaceful diversity that this city could really benefit from.

That's what I was going for when I commissioned it, I tell him, digging my knee into his pelvis.

Can you put me in touch with the painter? he asks while trying to use his free hand to beat futilely at my grip. The neighborhood where I grew up could do with a little more culture and hope.

Not likely, I say, keeping the gun held firm as he tries to wrest it away from me, I lost their contact information when their brothel got sucked into a black hole.

When their what did what? he asks, clawing at my chokin' arm.

Don't worry about it, I say, it's old news, and I drag his sorry ass over to the opposite corner of my office. You just tell Slick that his message was received when you get back.

Oh, so I can go? he asks, wheezing from exertion as he tries to beat his elbow into my side. You sure can, I say, and I throw open the window and shove him out of it.

A satisfying aaaaaiiiiiieeeeeee!!! follows him out the window, and shortly after that comes an even more satisfying spwack. Any good ass-thrashing should be accompanied by unique and evocative onomatopoeia, and the ones my poundings produce on the regular could give the Sunday Funnies a six-issue run for their money. I shut the window, straighten my tie, and strike a hardboiled pose in my chair with my feet on my desk.

But that's just the way things go when you're one of the greatest gumshoes to ever grace the good guy gang. Sometimes something so simple as an early evening monologue can be interrupted by some big palooka tryin' to peeve your posterior with nothin but applesauce in his-- Aw hell, he's throwing rocks at the window.

I open it up. Leave it alone, chief, I call down to him. The jig is up, the jugs are out, and you're the milkmaid.

I know, I know, he yells up through the window, I just gotta know where the hell I am! What do you mean? I shout back. You're outside!

But this ain't no outside ive ever seen, he keeps yelling. It's got all these weird motionless stick figure people and this weird ugly dog. And I think there's something down the street that looks like your skeleton and I really ain't got it in me to think about why I somehow know it's yours.

Oh, right, I holler pensively, I forgot for a moment that it's only outside in the imaginary world. He shouts up to me. The imaginary world?

Yeah, I shout back to him. The imaginary world.

Well, he says to himself, taking a moment to reflect on his situation and how I could have heard him talking to himself before yelling back up again, how the hell do I get back to the real world?

Well first you gotta get to the fire escape, I tell him. You'll see it on the side of the brick building next to mine that's a story or two shorter. You climb the ladder to the roof and take the stairs to-- hold on, youll probably need to write this down. You got a pen?

Yeah, he shouts, digging through his pockets, but I ain't got nothin' to write on!

Hold tight, I tell him, and I rifle around in my desk drawer for a note card. Take this, I call out, and I let the card fly. It flutters through the air like a monarch butterfly above the gulf of mexico, or like a sea shanty floating in a late Havana evening breeze.

He catches it as it gets close and looks at it before telling me what I already know. This is just a wallet-sized photograph of you shirtless, he says.

Well obviously, I call back down. But if you flip it over, the back is blank and you can write on it. He shakes his head. But wont you want it back? he asks me

Are you kiddin me? I laugh a good, hearty, derisive laugh in his face, except across the street and five stories up. I'll be fine without it. I've got hundreds.

He shrugs and flips the photo over. You ready? I ask him.

Holy shit, he says, just fucking start already.

Well gee, I call down there, that's awfully strong language for someone who's technically imaginary.

Oh my god, he says, do you love anything as much as you love the sound of your own voice? I snort and scoff at him. I also love how quickly I was able to kick your ass.

No wonder Slick wants you dead, he shouts up.

If Slick wanted me dead, I call down, he'd do it his own damn self. Now write this down, I say, and I tell him the instructions.

They're pretty simple instructions, of course. Just find the fire escape, take the ladder up to the roof, take the stairs up to the window, and that'll take you to the office of one Ace Dick, my friendly rival and sometimes-associate. That's the simple answer, of course, since as long as he opens the window, you'd get back to the real world just one door down from mine. But that relies on him letting you in, and he has a hard time imagining he'd let anyone in.

He sounds like a real dick, he yells up at me.

Well he sure isn't an imaginary one, I tell him. It's right there in the name. But as I was saying, if he doesn't let you in, which he probably won't, you gotta stand up on the stairway railing and use that to climb up to the roof on top of his imaginary office. Up

there, you'll find a three by three square of cinderblocks. On the lower right hand corner, you'll notice that one of the cinderblocks is about a centimeter-to-half-an-inch shorter than the other ones. The goal here is to get that cinderblock into the center of all the cinderblocks, but you can only move one cinderblock at a time -- and only the length of a single cinderblock.

A slider puzzle? he asks loudly. I hate those!

Nah, this one's not so bad, I shout back. It's more that it's just tedious, since the solution is relatively simple, and once you've gotten that in place, a ladder will appear. Normally, you'd use that to get onto Pickle Inspector's roof, but his skylight hasn't been fixed yet, so you'll have to use that as a bridge between Ace's building and the building across the street. Now, once you're on the other side, you'll need to dodge the hammers that keep popping out of the emergency exit on the roof of the hardware store.

The what? he asks, but I ignore him.

Continuing on, I tell him that while you do that, you have to make your way three buildings down until you're on the roof of the local cinema. Now, the cinema's marquee will be showing the wrong movies, and you'll have five minutes to rearrange the letters on the sign to be the right movies. This wasn't supposed to be a timed mission, but something about the way the memory is programmed accidentally makes it randomize to a new scramble and a new solution every five minutes.

What in the goddamn? he asks me.

I know, I know, I tell him. This one's actually a real pain in the ass. It's a new addition for in case we get locked in our hallway again and we haven't worked all the bugs out yet.

You got locked in your hallway? he shouts up at me.

Do you wanna get back to the real world or not? I shoot back. All right, all right, he grumbles. Fine. Continue.

Thank you, I say. I will. So, once you've got that done, the owner of the cinema will open the door to thank you. Don't bother trying to talk to him -- he's also on a pre-programmed loop -- but if you get in the door, the main theatre has a movie showing on repeat. From the main theater, if you can go to the back and enter the projectionist's booth. In there are two windows: one that the projector is showing through, and one that you can use to get into the bottom floor men's bathroom in my building, and then you'll be safe and sound in the real world.

Where do I go from there? he shouts up.

I trust that you can find your way to the exit from there, I shout down, and you can go home and tell Spades Slick that his plan has been an arousing success.

Don't you mean rousing? he asks.

No, I say, and I shut the window in his face. Or at least as in-his-face as it can be from this distance. If he keeps wanting to be a pain, of course, he can say it to the pane. And if that pun isn't too undignified for a 2010 hit single from legendarily violent rapper Eminem, it isn't too undignified for me.

But I digress.

Interruptions are part and parcel for a guy like me. You can't expect everything to go off without a hitch. Sometimes you think a case is straightforward right up until you figure out that your client was the murderer the whole time. Or sometimes your neighbor calls for an order of midnight harlotry and you end up with a giant stone bust

of an actor parked outside your office door. These things happen. But a true sleuth rolls with the changes. Being stodgy and fixed is how you end up like... well...

Like the guy who ordered said strumpets all that time ago and yet is currently knocking on my door.

Amazing.

I open up the door, which I have smartly re-hung to open inward in the event that all this idiocy repeats itself.

What is it, Ace, I ask with a sigh.

The portly pugilist that calls himself Ace Dick stands framed in the lower half of my doorway.

He opens his magnificent maw to mumble out his complaint of the day. Did you know anything about the Midnight Crew having a new guy?

I laugh. Yeah, Ace, I already found out about him. What's he doing here? he asks me.

Beats me, I say to him. I think this is the Crew's way of hazing him.

Lazy bastids, he says with a pseudo sage nod. They oughta haze him them own damn selves. So you let him in? I ask him.

What? No, he says. Told me his story, but I'm not about to let some moron from the mob climb into my office. No sir. He wouldn't stop pounding on the window either, so I just unplugged it.

You... I stare at him for a moment. You just unplugged the window? Yeah, he says. That way I wouldn't have to hear him anymore.

Yeah, maybe, I say, but Ace -- you remember what happens to someone on the other side of an unpowered window, right?

Ace is quiet for a bit.

You don't remember, I say, do you.

No, no, I remember, he says. But you can remind me and that'd be fine, I guess.

Well in your window's case, I tell him, the darkness on his side is going to summon the Wrath of the Dark Saint Olfalcus and his Bold Flagellum of Heresy,

Right, right, Ace says. Santa Claus and his bowl full of jelly. I remember now. Yeah, and that's bad, I say to him.

Probably, he says.

We pass some quiet moments in mutual stupidity for a moment before I get fed up. So don't you think you oughta go back and plug it back in? I ask him.

Why? he asks me.

So he doesn't die? I ask him.

...Why? he asks me.

Oh for the sake of everything that has ever happened in infinite paradox space, I say. I'll do it myself.

I storm out of my room and barge into Ace's, not bothering to notice if he's following me or not.

It's a little tricky in the dark, and I trip over a few things that I'm sure were part of a long-abandoned broken-phone puzzle that he scattered over the floor in frustration. Finally I make it to the darkened window. I plug it in, and in an act of unfathomable generosity, I open the window and yank the bloodied mobster back into reality.

What the hell was that? he screams between ragged breaths. Well, at least you're conscious, I tell him.

No, seriously, he keeps screaming, what the actual fuck was that? Occupational hazard, I tell him with a shrug.

Occupational.... what?? He shakes his head and struggles to his feet. No, no, he says, dusting his suit off and trembling. No, fuck this. Fuck all of this. Fuck mobsters and detectives.

I mean, who wouldn't? I tell him.

No, fuck you especially, he says. I'm going to take my mother's advice and become a priest. I'm outta here, he says, and sure enough, he scrambles out the door, down the hallway, down the stairs, and presumably out of the office building and out of crime forever.

You see that, Ace? I say, assuming correctly that Ace did finally catch up. What'd you do? he asks in disbelief.

I turn around and smile my patented, trademarked cocksure grin at him. I turned another soul from crime and sent him down the straight and narrow path.

What? he asks.

I couldn't've done it without you, I add with a pat on his shoulder, and I start walking out of the room.

Hey wait! he yells back. New guy bled all over the place here!

Eh, I say, not bothering to look back, not so bad that he can't get to a hospital in time. Naw, he says, I mean who's gonna clean this up?

Wordlessly, I toss him a business card for one of my favorite cleaning services: The Goodfella Showroom. They'll mop, steam, and vacuum anything you need them to, and they don't stop until you're fully, visibly, and deeply satisfied. It's the classiest of custodial conveniences, and all you gotta do is dial them up at 1-800-WET-SUCK.

No sooner do I get back to my office than the phone rings again. I straighten my tie and my hat and put on my most stoic expression – people don't come to me for a half-assed experience, even over the phone.

I pick it up. I say a few words, they say a few back... well, I'm sure I don't need to bore you with the details. I've already taken up enough of your time tonight, and by now, I know you've already figured out how these things tend to go. Someone's got an issue. Or maybe a dilemma. But they've called the right fella with the right name, because either way, they need someone to search for a solution.

In other words, you might say, they've got themselves a Problem.

The Felt – The Narrative’s at Play

by Skyeec2

01 - Itchy

One Doctor Scratch, head of the Felt and direct facilitator of the wants and whims of Lord English, was a very omnipotent, very busy being existing outside the river of space and time. As such he did not have the patience or want to waste his endless amounts of time and energy on such a trivial, if absolutely necessary to complete his plans and purpose, task.

But that, my dears, was why he had the collection of individuals known as The Felt, with their odd greenness and knack for temporal-based shenanigans. They were sure to be able to get what he needed to be done completed for him, it wasn't as if the task was an overly difficult one. It should be easy for any of them to be able to do so.

With the ease of the task in mind, he decided it best to send the fastest of The Felt, Itchy, Number One of them to be able to complete it in a timely manner.

Decision made, he summoned Itchy into his office and prepared for the speedster's arrival. An arrival, that took far too much time considering who he was waiting for. As usual.

If he didn't know better, and of course Doctor Scratch knew better, he'd think the speedster was doing such on purpose and trying his patience. But of course, that couldn't be the case because there's no way Scratch would have allowed such behaviour to occur and at a rate that would lend towards frequency.

No way at all.

He'd disposed of others for less, there were only a few here that were to be exceptions from that and the entirety of The Felt knew who that special exception was.

There was no need to tiptoe around such a widely known fact.

The door opened as if prompted by Scratch's musings and the awaited Itchy entered, twitchy as he ever was and remembering himself enough to avoid direct eye-contact with Scratch's head. Or perhaps he was just looking anywhere but at his head. The reason hardly mattered all that truly did matter, in the end, was the result.

"Ah there you are!" Scratch welcomed him in, ushering him over to the open space of floor in front of his desk. No chair. A chair would be inviting him to sit like they were on some equal playing field, and there was nothing further from reality. "Finally decided to make your appearance."

It was phrased like a statement but that didn't stop Itchy from saying something under his breath, words quick and slurring together in a way that made them unheard to all. Except Scratch of course. No one in the mansion could even dream to hide something from him. They were all aware of that.

"And what was that?" Scratch questioned, tilting his head just so to read as a question, cold and dull and having a noticeable effect on the speedster as he stiffened before him, drawing himself up and shaking his head in a spark, jerking motion, denying that anything had been said in his rushed, running together words. "Of course you didn't."

Scratch may have been letting him off of the proverbial hook tonight, but only because he had something for him to do before he was ready to make an example of him. Once the task was complete the narrative would be completely different.

"Now, I have something for you to do for me. It's something that even your simple mind should be able to process, so I expect positive results sooner rather than later."

Itchy listens, attitude curbed by fear as it should be until Scratch has fully briefed him on the task he was to complete.

Itchy's a... being of mediocre intelligence. Surely he'll be able to figure out his own details.

"Go along now," he dismissed the Speedster, ushering him from his office with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I don't want to see you again until you've finished what I've asked of you. Understand?"

And then Itchy was gone much quicker than he appeared, leaving Scratch to his office to await what was sure to be a swift return and good news.

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02 - Doze

It turned out, as so few things do for Scratch, that sending Itchy to complete the very important, very vital task was not the best idea.

Somehow the Speedster had managed to take something he should have very well been able to complete in literally no time at all and fail in a way that not only reflected poorly upon him and his ability to complete simple tasks, but also on Scratch for trusting him to be able to do so in the first place.

But best-laid plans did have a tendency to go up in flames despite what was wished by those following them and perhaps Itchy simply, forgot, in his rush to account for certain things and factors that could take his guaranteed success and throw it away like so many used coffee grounds. Completely independent of anything Scratch could have done.

No matter.

This was why Scratch had more than one underling to do things for him. More than one egg to put his trust in when the time came to it.

Where one failed another was sure to succeed. If only to save themselves from sharing the consequences of failures with the first to fail the task.

Motivation came in many forms, who was Scratch to belittle any kind of it in particular? Especially when it made those holding it so much easier to mold into what he wanted of them?

Doze, Number Two of the Felt, was so, so easy to mold with the threat of what Itchy had earned for himself hanging over his own head as well. Doze knew exactly how to act when Scratch invited him into his office, even though he's a bit slow on getting there.

No matter, Scratch is a very patient individual. When time and space meant nothing, why would he be anything else?

Doze gets to where he's supposed to be soon enough, standing in front of Scratch's desk, shoulders slumped and movements slow as he waited for Scratch to address him first. Deferring to a superior and more dangerous creature.

Which make no mistake Scratch was.

Doze was there for a purpose, one he would fulfill. Else Scratch would dispose of him like so much filth in this city.

One failure was more than enough, thank you very much.

"I doubt I have to go through the trouble of explaining something you should already know?" Scratch questioned, forearms resting on his desk and hands folded together, resting the curvature of his head upon them.

Doze starts to respond but there's no time to wait for him to put sounds into words. Scratch was patient, yes, but Doze's abilities are a test to even the most endless abyss of peace and serenity and Scratch does not have all night to be entertaining him.

Not when there's work to be done.

"Yes well as I'm sure you already know there's a task to be completed. Our dear Itchy was somehow *unable* to complete it and has since been *reprimanded* for his failure. And now, my dear Doze," Scratch unfolded his hands from each other to lay them flat upon his desk, pushing himself to his feet in an easy, fluid motion. "It has come to you to finish it for me."

The 'or else' is a silent acknowledgment between them both, as it should be. No need to state the obvious.

Doze had started to perspire somewhere during Scratch's address, sweat beading just under the brim of his hat before starting to slide down his face in a torturously slow drag.

Scratch lets him stand in relative silence for a moment, relative because Doze is still

trying to piece together his response from earlier, the poor thing. But Scratch hardly cares to wait and strides around his desk to guide the slowest of his subordinates away from his desk and back to the door of his office.

“I trust you’ll have it completed in no time at all.” No time to Scratch that was, to whom time meant very little too. “Ta ta now~”

The door closes as Doze finishes his first response, enclosing Scratch within the green of his office as he turned back to his desk.

Surely there was nothing to worry about now. Surely the task would come to completion as it should have under Itchy’s care.

Scratch need only wait for the results to fall into his lap.

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03 - Trace

On second thought perhaps it was not the best idea to send someone who was unable to react quickly to what was going on around him. Perhaps, indeed, that was not the kind of individual the task looming over Scratch needed in order to be accomplished.

But no matter.

Doze was now a failure alongside Itchy and when he next appeared, however long that took, Scratch would ensure he received the consequences for his failings in kind.

Yes, there was nothing else for it. After all, it’d be rude to punish one failure and not another wouldn’t it? Indeed it would be.

And Doctor Scratch was many things but rude could not be counted amongst them, that was for sure. He’d ensure that any who even implied otherwise were politely corrected upon the matter.

Back to the task at hand.

The task, still lacking in its want of being complete and fulfilled after the first two

failures of Itchy's and Doze's attempts.

It was time to summon the next subordinate that would be tackling the task Scratch had for them. A simple task made difficult twice over for no reason at all.

The price of working with those not blessed with the knowledge and foresight that Scratch himself was, more the pity.

Two down but there's another ready and willing, in a matter of speaking, to take their places.

Hopefully Trace would be able to see where Itchy and Doze had both failed in kind and avoid repeating them to complete the task at hand? Scratch could only hope.

The longer it took to get the task completed and tucked away the closer they drew to being unable to complete it at all, an outcome that should have been both impossible in theoretics and execution but was slowly starting to prove otherwise.

Which Scratch was less than pleased to even entertain the notion of.

But Trace and his trails would handle it before such a notion could continue to inch towards reality, else Scratch may have to change the consequences the tiniest amount going forward. It simply wouldn't be fair to *not* properly punish those that earned more of his ire than those that had failed previously.

He would consider it, hold the threat of it over Trace's head so that he was aware of what was at stake should he return empty-handed.

Trace doesn't arrive any quicker or slower than Scratch expects him, as good a start as any he could have made tonight.

"Ah!" So wonderful to see you Number Three!" He didn't even bother to fully divert his attention away from the piece of paper before him, pen flying across the page in letters unseen by eyes not his own. "Do feel free to come in, I've been waiting for your arrival."

He continues to choose not to look towards Number Three, letting Trace sweat a moment though he hadn't yet done anything to earn his ire.

There was no harm in allowing him to sweat amongst the trails of prior failures within

the office though, none at all.

He soon finished the sentence he'd been working on, perhaps taking a bit longer than he needed just because he could, and sets his pen down perfectly parallel to the paper he'd been working on, folding his hands together and focusing his attention on the individual in front of him.

"I trust you're aware enough of what's going to be asked of you that I needn't waste so much of our mutual time explaining the task ahead in great detail?"

Trace hesitates a moment but nods, proving himself one of Scratch's more reliable once more. Whether he would remain as such or not would be seen as he either succeeded or failed in the task ahead of him.

"Good," he nods and picks up his pen again, clear in his dismissal. "I look forward to seeing the results of your success when you do return."

Surely this would be the success he'd been waiting for.

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04 - Clover

It seemed that luck had not been on his side, it certainly hadn't been on Trace's.

He'd seen where Itchy and Doze had both failed, to be sure. But his own failures had been hidden from his sight and thus he'd blundered into them without thought or pause with all the grace of an elephant, returning to Scratch and the manor empty-handed and heavy-hearted.

Scratch had been quick to deal with him, truly his patience was starting to grow thin as time hummed with the start of splintering, of cracking apart and tearing at the seams. The task not yet completed when it should have been and those of The Felt suffering all the more for it alongside Scratch's ever-growing ire with them and their failings.

But now it was time to stop focusing on the mistakes of the past and turn his attention forwards while he still could, time to pull the strings of fate to get him the success he

wanted from the task he was giving out to his most loyal of underlings and subordinates.

A bit of luck was all he needed to get things back on track enough to keep it all together.

And he had someone practically dripping with luck, on hand and eager to do anything and everything Scratch asked of him. It was time to apply the little fellow to the task at hand.

Clover was always so happy to be of help to him, to The Felt as a whole, to apply his abilities to their benefit, whenever Fate allowed it, the fickle temptress. Why shouldn't he take advantage of such willingness?

It'd be particularly rude of him to not allow Clover the chance to help, to succeed where those before him had failed and advance his station within the inner workings of The Felt. Mainly who was Scratch's favorite at that point in time.

The smallest of The Felt was eager to receive his summons and appeared in Scratch's office with all the energy he showed in everything he did, practically vibrating where he stood in front of the desk.

"I trust I don't need to inquire as to your readiness to work?" Scratch asked, ignoring the rolling eyes he got from Clover in response. "You'll be the fourth I've sent out to attempt to complete this task, as I'm sure you're aware. Even more that my patience is growing thin as time starts to slip away from us."

A stronger eye roll, this one accompanied by a dismissive wave of Clover's hand as he assures Scratch that the task will be completed before he knows it and there would be nothing to worry or be concerned over any longer.

A good thing to hear after the three failed attempts immediately preceding Clover's presence in his office, even better once luck played out as Scratch wished it to in order to give him the result he wanted out of sending his subordinates out with their orders.

Guarantee in hand he allows Clover the honour of staying a moment, of chatting about the task he's being sent out on and the general mood within The Felt's manor; not that Scratch truly cared too much about that but he enjoyed being in possession

of the information all the same.

And then he sent Clover on his way, on small feet of luck and good-will, certain in the knowledge that he would no longer need to worry overly much about the task and its state of being incomplete. It would come to fruition soon enough, in a rousing, amazing success, nothing to worry about at all.

Scratch settled back into his chair, allowing himself to cast his attention to another matter needing his focus in order to foster the events he needed to occur on the timeline.

He picked up his pen, twirling it between his fingers a moment before setting it to paper, unseen letters detailing the next step in his plans for when it inevitably came time to put it into motion.

Spinning, turning, winding pieces falling into place exactly where they should, ensuring the correct timeline comes to the outcome it was always meant to achieve.

Time wouldn't be stalled for anyone, it would continue regardless of the wishes of mere mortals, he would ensure as such.

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05 - Fin

Clover didn't return immediately upon failing the task. Not the smartest of moves from the usually intelligent little creature but he was able to stave off Scratch's increased ire the smallest amount by shifting something else on the playing field, something he needed complete for a time a bit further down the stream of continuation.

It was a welcome occurrence, to be sure, that task also needed to occur and be carried out one way or another. But with a failure already hanging over his head and then his fleeing from his inevitable punishment, Scratch wasn't in the mood to show kindness or respite to Clover. Not at all.

Failing was one thing, failing to return afterward was another altogether.

His punishment, while not as severe as it could have been considering the shift he put

into place on the temporal playing field, was dealt out swiftly and without hesitation. Scratch wasn't going to let anyone think him kind or merciful when wronged or disappointed in any sense of the word.

The rest of the manor knew what had occurred, what had happened to Clover and why his punishment was so much worse than the three that immediately preceded him, on top of being the fourth to fall in the task set out for him.

Scratch didn't care much for their idle gossip and the tension running through the ranks, focusing only on who was next on the way to hopefully getting his task finished and completed for him.

After Number Four's failure came the chance for Number Five to try his mettle at getting the task finished.

Number Five was doing his best to appear nonchalant and dismissive of the fact that four others had stood in the very same spot as he now did and had gone on only to fail, slumped where he stood with his arms crossed in front of him.

At least he was showing some form of etiquette and keeping his gaze in a respectful location, a small boon to the situation at hand.

"Now," Scratch started, not caring to waste his time drawing the interaction out when Fin was already acting his usual self, more than likely aware of something Scratch himself was not yet able to see. The bonus of being able to see trails of the upcoming futures to be sure.

Though Fin was unable to know exactly when each trail was set in the timeline; what came first, what came after, how far forward in the timeline they lay. To see things without the context of them in time, was there ever a thing that could be considered worse?

Scratch didn't believe so, but that hardly mattered at the moment. There was business to get back to after all.

"As the fifth to be sent out I'm expecting a better result from you," Fin didn't outwardly react like Clover had, a clear difference between Number Five's perceived ease and Clover's actual confidence in being in front of him. "Look to the future and find

exactly what you'll do to succeed and perhaps I shall find something suitable as a reward."

That catches Fin's attention immediately. He hasn't offered anything like a reward previously, but perhaps a bit of extra incentive is all he needs to get the ball rolling the way he wants it to be instead of being stuck at a stand-still, or worse moving in reverse. Fin was certainly interested, standing a bit straighter as he focused on Scratch closely.

"What kind will be decided upon your successful return," he went on to say, drawing Fin further into doing the job well for him. "I shall be eagerly awaiting your return." A clear dismissal, an indicator for Fin to leave the office and get started on completing the job for him.

With the forward sight in his possession, Fin should be able to finish the task for him with little fuss or nonsense.

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06 - Die

When he had said Fin would be able to look to the events of the future to find his success, he had not meant that he should have completely thrown out his regard for the events of the past. That was how one forgot mistakes that had already occurred and repeated them up until the end of time.

That was how he got Number Five failing in exactly the same way as Number Three had before him. Which was a coincidence that Scratch was less than pleased to see come to pass.

But now he was zero-to-five and more than exasperated with his subordinates and their inability to complete even the most simple of tasks by his measure. Truly, it wasn't that difficult to complete, was it?

Was he underestimating the struggle of the task? Or overestimating their abilities to get it done how he wants them to? Perhaps he should greatly lower his expectations of them all so that someone else can just happen to be able to get what he wants to be

done, done for him.

Only one way to find out he supposed.

With Fin and his failings shuffled away from the forefront of his mind. Scratch turned his attention to who would be the next to be sent out in an attempt to finish the task for him.

Up to Number Six already. Mister Die.

Die who appeared in his office with his chickens in tow, not something Scratch had been expecting, nor wanting, from the occurrence. Oh what a turn this timeline had taken, how things had progressed in ways he had never thought they could, never imagined they would. Oh, what a world he had come to exist within.

“Did you need to bring them to the meeting?” He asked, looking between Die and the chicken he held in his arms, petting the feathers on it’s back in constant, repetitive motions. Die nods a stiff, jerky motion, muttering a stiff confirmation and Scratch decided it best to continue instead of lingering on the eccentric behaviour. “I see. If you believe you require their assistance to complete the task at hand then by all means, include them in your efforts going forward.”

Die nods and clutches his chicken closer to his chest, holding it as securely as one would a comfort blanket, one of his chickens clucking around at his heels, pecking at the carpet in search of some kind of bug or lint to consume. He seemed to be more than pleased with the assistance he was being allowed.

As long as he was going to get the job done, Scratch cared very little about how Die went about the task Scratch had assigned to him.

And Die with his ability to travel to different timelines would hopefully be able to find one where the job was easier for him to complete, as long as he returned with it finished he could bring as many of his companions with him as he wished.

Scratch couldn’t really bring himself to care overly much as time marched ever onwards and his subordinates started to prove their inabilities to do the tasks he was setting out for them.

Failures would be failures no matter how they came about, with or without assistance from nonsentient creatures. Only the timelines Die transported himself to would prove the deciding factors upon his measure of success.

Scratch would be awaiting the results as he always did.

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07 - Crowbar

Perhaps the ability to teleport to different timelines was not the most helpful when it manifested in the ways that Die's did. Being able to teleport from one timeline to another at the moment of death for whoever's pin was pulled was not exactly the most intelligent or survival-orientated of plans. Certainly not one that had been thought through very well.

Fortunately, for Die at least, he had not perished due to his ability and had been able to escape unharmed though in possession of one less chicken than when he'd left the mansion. But that wasn't really important in the grand scheme of things, not to Scratch at least.

He hardly cared as to the amount of feathered, egg-laying companions that Die returned to the manor with, if Die truly missed it then he was perfectly within his own rights and abilities to acquire another. Scratch wouldn't monitor him, as long as the creatures behaved themselves and stayed out of where they were not supposed to be then they could continue to exist as they wished to.

They hadn't helped Die to succeed in the task Scratch wanted of him, so why would he give them any mind at all.

Speaking of success and the complete and utter lack of it around the manor, Scratch was growing more than a little tired of no one being able to finish the task he'd set for them. Six he'd sent out already where the first should have been more than capable of seeing it to its completion.

Thankfully, the next on his list was his most reliable and trustworthy of underlings one he could put his trust into wholly and with the assurance that he'd get results out

of him. Moreso than the previous time he'd thought as much.

Crowbar was a good worker, someone Scratch could trust to get work done in a good amount of time and stay in control of the rest of the members of The Felt, keep them in something like organized unity and good behaviour instead of descending into chaos and in-fighting like they so often threatened to do.

Number Seven was standing stiffly in front of him, straight-back and stiff with his crowbar held in front of him, mouth pressed into a thin, stiff line as he met Scratch's attention as he firmly as he was able to.

A commendable effort, one Scratch recognized and applauded Crowbar for.

"It's been some time since our last meeting, hasn't it?" They both knew the question was little more than a formality, a polite predecessor for the main reasoning behind Scratch summoning him here. "We simply do have to make it a more frequent occurrence going forward."

Crowbar nods, agrees in his stiff and respectful way, more than aware of the truth to his own and Scratch's existence in a way that only one other in The Felt was.

"I'm glad you agree! We will have to arrange something," no such thing would occur unless it was absolutely necessary but it was nice to pretend and keep Crowbar on his toes. "Onto the reason behind my calling you here, my little task has yet to have much in the way of progress. I do hope that you'll be able to figure something out to change that?"

Crowbar stiffened ever so slightly at the topic, hands clenching on the piece of metal he was holding. And then he nodded, firm and confident in himself as Scratch had come to expect of him.

Perfect.

"Splendid!" Scratch stood from his desk, for no reason other than to see Number Seven stiffened ever so slightly at the motion, and clasped his hands before him. "Off you go then! I'll be expecting you back soon enough."

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08 - Sn0wman

Time to scratch yet another name off of the list as Crowbar returned with his proverbial tail between his legs, crowbar clenched tightly in his hands as if fearing Scratch would bother to take such a silly little thing from him as punishment for his failings.

Nonsense. Scratch had far better ways to punish Crowbar and his inability to succeed in what was supposed to be such a simple task, such a mundane, everyday, uncomplicated thing he was asking of them all.

Now if only someone were to be able to do it all would be right with the timeline.

He was starting to run out of individuals to send out in the hopes of accomplishing it for him. Already he'd gone through the solids of The Felt and into the stripes barring...

...

Best... not to consider sending *her* out to attempt to complete the task at hand.

It wasn't that he thought her unable to, no of course not she was just as capable as the rest of The Felt around her, it was just that with the unforeseen difficulties the rest of The Felt had faced when he'd sent them out it might prove too dangerous to risk her safety.

Sn0wman did hold the very safety and continuation of their universe in her hands after all. The ebb and flow of time and space in their small cluster of stars, planets, galaxies, and realms, was directly tied to her well-being, her very life force.

To risk her was to risk them all.

And Scratch had put far too much effort into orchestrating the past, present, and future of this universe to risk something like that occurring.

No. Best to avoid sending her out when things were already proving more difficult than he initially thought they were going to be. Best to just not even make her aware of the situation at hand.

He didn't want her doing something stupid and deciding she could complete the task anyway despite the danger it may have posed to the universe at large.

No. no need at all.

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09 - Stitch

Well yes, Scratch was sure that should it had been safe enough to send Sn0wman out to attempt to complete the task that she would have failed like those before her had. Yes, it was only a matter of fact that such an outcome would have been the result had things aligned in any universe he could have sent her out to attempt the task without the threat of the universe ending should anything unexpected occur.

Yes, nothing to worry about, there were a number of others waiting in the wings anyway, ready and willing to do whatever Scratch wanted of them if only it would make their lives easier for themselves within the manor and the felt as a whole. Favour carried a long way, after all, there was no understating that.

And why shouldn't Scratch extend the opportunity to the rest of The Felt to prove themselves more competent than those that were numbered before them? The first set had had their chances and had squandered them away, it was only fair to allow the others the same attempt.

The others had failed him over and over again, eight times in a row now, why not see if one of those remaining would be able to succeed for him?

The first of the next set had been summoned to his office, standing prim and proper before him in a timely and respectable manner, a needle in one hand, a piece of fabric in the other as Stitch worked to fix another new patch onto it. Another of the many Scratch had seen him working on during previous interactions and meetings, either a completely new one or one that had been patched and mended so much it had lost much of its original colour and content.

Such an odd habit, though Scratch supposed if it kept Number Nine prepared to help and mend the rest of The Felt in the inevitable instances of harm being done

to them then who was Scratch to judge really?

For if he judged then that implied that he cared and that couldn't be farther from the truth.

As long as he was able to do the task Scratch wanted of him, on top of keeping the doubles in perfect upkeep, then Stitch could do whatever he wanted with his time.

"I do hope you're aware of what's expected of you?" Stitch nodded, gaze remaining focused on the patchwork in his hands. "Good, if you do need to know anything, though I highly doubt you should as something like this hardly needs much explaining, you can talk to those that have attempted and failed before you."

Stitch nods again still focused downwards instead of at Scratch.

"And before you leave," Stitch finally looked up to him, his one good eye focusing on him while the other was unable to. "Be sure to be on the lookout for any... fraying whilst you're out, won't you? If there's something causing this task to be unable to be completed then I want it taken care of, understood?"

Stitch stares at him for a long moment before nodding again, his needle always at the ready if it should be found that there's some temporal anomaly at play.

Only time would tell.

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10 - Sawbuck

If he didn't know better Scratch would say that someone was purposefully finding ways to make the small, insignificant task he was requesting be completed, impossible to complete. Some outside, external force that was shifting things just so out of alignment to make what was supposed to be a simple and easy task too difficult for his subordinates to accomplish.

But that was preposterous! There was no outside force dictating that all of his subordinates so far had to fail so that he had to continue down the line of them to get through all of them. Of course not, not at all.

Regardless, Stitch had returned empty of success and overwrought with failings, proving that he was not the one that Scratch should have sent out to complete the task he wanted.

Well, at the very least he now knew there wasn't anything temporal at play keeping the task from being completed. It was simply the incompetence of his subordinates!

But really, nine members had already failed and he was quickly running out of options for who he could send out in the hopes of getting the task done for him. There were only so many members of The Felt, only fifteen members in total and he was over half-way through the list now, not too many left to go now that he stepped back and considered the situation fully.

Hmm. Perhaps he should consider giving the task he was sending them out on some more serious thought going forward.

After Stitch came Sawbuck, nervous and fidgeting and seemingly far too large to fit the same space those before him had occupied only days prior to his own form. At least he was being properly respectful towards Scratch, paying him the proper mind and attention he deserved for deciding to give him the opportunity to succeed where so many others had failed before him.

He'd fidgeted through Scratch's explanation of the job, nodding in the appropriate places. And then voiced a million and one questions as to what he might face while out there and other such nonsense topics concerning the task ahead of him.

Which was more than most of the others had, but also more to irritate Scratch with. Such a nervous creature, completely unnecessary due to the simple fact that there was so little that could cause harm to Sawbuck without the express intent to, and even then a tremendous amount of force would need to be used to do any actual damage to the large Felt member.

If it was to occur though then Sawbuck and whoever was attempting to harm him would be transported to a different timeline, nothing too outwardly difficult to deal with.

Who knew, perhaps a different time was exactly what was needed to get the task finished as Scratch requested it?

He could only wait and see.

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11 - Matchsticks

He could only wait for Sawbuck to return to the manor with his hands clenched tight, fists shaking with his failings as he prepared himself to face Scratch's ire with the task hanging over them all, looming in its still yet incomplete nature.

What a wonderful sight to behold, how perfect that he'd had to wait to see such a thing.

At least he hadn't been left waiting due to Sawbuck traveling either ahead or backward through time with no way to properly discern which direction he'd gone or how far in either direction. A small kindness to say the least. At least Scratch wasn't as irritated by his return as he could have been.

He was, of course, still very annoyed and irritated that the job he'd expected to be complete by this point was still resting firmly on the other side of the court but he could have been more so if other factors had come into play.

Perhaps he was going about this in the worst way he possibly could though.

Perhaps he needed to change up his tactics completely if he wished to get this task finished in such a way that left him without the need to go through the last remainders of his subordinates and give them their own equal opportunity to fail at the task at hand.

Perhaps he needed someone that could just go in and get out quickly should the situation turn in such a way that required a quick and timely escape from danger

Perhaps that would give him the results he'd been wanting all this time.

Matchsticks was in possession of abilities such as that.

With the assistance of a blaze of flame, Matchstick was able to travel from any singular point to another, which would hopefully give him the edge needed to get the task Scratch had over and completed without the fuss and struggle those before him had faced. Not to mention being a formidable opponent in his own rights on top of that.

Yes. A new outlook on that task and a new way of tackling it was exactly what Scratch needed, exactly what The Felt needed and Matchsticks was definitely going to be the one to finally bring him the success he was after.

The large Felt member was imposing in size and stature but well mannered, attention trained and focused on Scratch with his extinguisher clasped with firm confidence in his hands, ready to use the device to cut off his escape way should he need to protect his own skin.

Scratch was sure that he'd be able to get it done for him, that Marchsticks would be able to maneuver himself around the timeline until he reached the success Scratch was hoping for.

With his ability to escape at a moment's ignition and close off his avenue of departure before any adversaries or unwanted presences were able to follow him, Scratch was sure this would be the shift in the timeline he'd been waiting on.

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12 - Eggs

Or perhaps that would only be yet another avenue for failure waiting to happen. Perhaps changing tactics wouldn't change the results at all and Scratch would be, once again, left to deal with yet another aftermath of failure on his hands.

Matchsticks returned to the manor, hat singed at the brim and extinguisher empty of foam. Joining the ranks of those before him as a failure and unable to complete the easy task Scratch had set out for them.

Scratch didn't know what part of the task was turning out so difficult for all those he was sending out in the hopes of getting it done but it must be something quite extreme

to be ruining things so spectacularly for him.

One would think that something so simple would be difficult to ruin in so many, numerous ways but it seemed that each of his subordinates had found a way to do so, and quite efficiently at that.

But that left him with one less underling to give the task of completing this job for him to, only four more were waiting in the wings now that Number Eleven had proven himself amongst those incapable of completing something so simple, so trivial.

Though, considering who he was turning to next perhaps he had even more than he had first assumed. When one had the ability to become multiple individuals in a short amount of time, then did it even matter if he started out as a singular individual?

Eggs had himself an intriguing little ability that he called his own, one that could easily be utilized when numbers were low and dwindling to become nothing less of an impressive, imposing force ready to act towards a singular goal.

Surely that would be more than enough to get the task completed?

Scratch certainly hoped so, else things could take a drastic turn regarding his mood.

Until then it was time to call Eggs into his office. It was time for Number Twelve to take his attempt at proving himself half-way competent.

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13 - Biscuits

Or perhaps two someones were needed because one of them refused to go out on what had started as a very easy, very bare-bones basic task without his partner in crime to accompany him outside of the manor's boundaries.

Biscuits was a simple-minded creature, gullible in his belief that his oven had any time-related ability whatsoever other than the ability to open its door when it was set to do so. Useless without being used in tandem with Eggs' egg-timer.

What a joy.

Well, as long as they actually managed to be able to get the task done they could work together if they wished to do so.

Or they could fall together and face double the consequences as they were the ones that wanted to work together in the first place. If they wished to combine their efforts and potential hopeful success then they would do the same to their potential failures.

Scratch cared little for specifics in the long run; at least the specific of unimportant matters. It hardly mattered to him how the task was completed as long as it was.

And between the two of them and the numerous, numerous temporal doppelgangers they could create, there should have been a great margin for success.

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14 - Quarters

No. No of course things couldn't be that easy, not for him, not for this particular task at hand. Why should he have expected anything different? Hadn't the others already proven that already?

Another failure added to the list, this one twofold and twice as embarrassing and twice as disastrous in results for Eggs and Biscuits who had left together and returned without the task completed and no one to blame but themselves.

They had wished to work together. They had failed together. They could handle being punished together.

It was only fair. And why oh why shouldn't he strive to be fair?

When they'd made their decision and acted towards it? He'd let them, told them what would come of the worst possible result and now it was their time to experience it.

Meanwhile, he had been left with the dilemma that there were only two remaining Felt members left; only two that hadn't been sent out in an attempt to complete the task he had ever so naively believed the rest of them should have been able to complete.

Only two others to prove themselves more competent than the rest of them when it came to following simple instructions.

Quarters was the next in line to be sent out into the world at large. Quarters and his interesting little coin tricks.

Being able to summon anyone of The Felt to his location was certainly something that could be used to his advantage should he end up needing assistance for whatever occurrences ended up coming to pass. Whatever difficulty he could face in this task that had once been simple and now was apparently anything but.

And with his own coin attached to Clover, the little luckster would be able to sway things in Quarters' favour this time since he'd failed to do so for himself previously. Perhaps this would be what Scratch needed to get a successful result for the task he was sending his underlings out on.

At this point though, there was little doubt in his mind that something would occur; something, anything, anything at all and completely ruin the task Scratch was sending him out on. He was sure it would occur, it was only a matter of what and when.

But who knew?

He'd been wrong about how straightforward and easy the task he was sending them out on was, perhaps he'd be proven wrong about this as well?

He could wait and see how Quarters decided to handle whatever situation he got himself into.

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15 - Cans

Perhaps, just perhaps, next time he won't have to specify that Quarters should take his and Clover's coin with him if he wanted to benefit from the luckster's abilities, or even that he should inform Clover if he needed to get away from whatever he got himself into and back to the smallest of The Felt's side. Instead, Quarters had decided to do neither of those things and returned a failure in all the ways that well

and truly mattered.

But it seemed that Scratch simply couldn't account for the presence of common sense in his subordinates now, could he? That would be far too sensible a thing to expect of any of them to contain in any sense of the word.

With Quarters returned to the manor that made fourteen times he'd given the task to his underlings in an attempt to get it completed in a timely manner. Fourteen failures and only one left to try to finish what he'd wanted of those that had come before, else he earn his place alongside the other in their consequences.

Cans wasn't one for higher thought. Not one to plan or think things through, no not at all.

Simple-minded in only the purest of ways, putting nothing but the next move to thought and even then that could be debated. What was instinct and what was well thought out, rational reasoning could often seem like the same thing during the heat of the moment and from those on the outside looking in.

When one could simply brute force a difficult obstacle to a point somewhere in the future there was little need to worry or think things through. Why bother changing tactics when the tried and true method worked oh so well for him?

As the last one remaining it was Cans' turn to prove that his method was superior to the others and that there was indeed one amongst The Felt that Scratch could entrust the completion of this task to.

It was time to see if brute force would bring him the success he was after.

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A Conclusion

Another failure. Another underling returned to the manor with nothing to show for their efforts outside of it within the city their existence functioned within.

Scratch should have expected as such, as he should have expected each failure after the unexpectedness of Itchy's empty return.

One would have hoped that the fifteenth attempt would have been enough to get the task completed, to somehow break the cycle they had all somehow fallen into and achieve something that could be classed as a success but no.

Things could never be so simple, so easy. And now Scratch needed to face the inevitable, unavoidable truth that this timeline was doomed to fall to pieces, crumble in on itself as the strings rotted away all because his subordinates couldn't--

"I found a packet of those grounds you've been after."

Scratch halted his internal monologue and turned away from his window, towards his desk where Sn0wman had made a seat for herself, a sealed bag of his most favoured coffee grounds placed nearby like a sign from the Lord himself.

"Wonderful!" He clapped his hands, applauding her like one would a child that had completed a particularly amusing trick. "I'm so glad to see that someone was able to complete my little task for me!"

There's a moment of pause, a beat of stillness as he ignores the fact that he'd passed over her initially due to the belief that she'd only fail as the others had before her and would continue to do so after her.

"Thank you for your assistance Sn0wman. I shall be sure to contact you should I require your abilities again."

A lie that Sn0wman herself was well aware of but it was of little meaning to her.

If Scratch wanted to send the others out on meaningless grocery run before his particular brand had been restocked that was entirely on him. She had only, far only interesting matters to focus on.

All in a Day's Work

by DigitalPopsicle

You were in charge of the crew known as the Felt. Well, you were Number Three if you were to get technical, but Number One and Two never really had hands-on dealings with these maroons you call a team. You suppose they're not even really a team considering how often they're at each other's throats over one thing or another.

No, screw that, you were a team, because you made them a team. It was your job to make them work as a team.

When Itchy was poking too much fun at Doze for being slow or stupid, it was you who pried them apart and told Itchy to find something else to entertain himself with.

When Clover was dancing those god-forsaken jigs at the wrong person (and who that was could change like the days of the week), it was you who had to pull him away and tell him to keep those feet firmly on the ground before he got in trouble.

You could go on and list an example for every member of the Felt but that would require far too much thinking and you were already tired after having to fix another Eggs-and-Biscuits related incident with your trusty crowbar. (One good thwack on that cursed oven was usually enough to counter whatever damned shenanigans had happened)

The point was that you were in charge of this rag-tag group of fuzzy lime leprechauns-turned-gangsters. While they mocked you and ribbed you and teased you, at the end of the day they listened to you cause they knew where your orders came from. And if they had a problem with the orders it was their own damned fault if something happened to them. Thankfully nothing had ever gotten that far, though a few had come close before being reminded of just who was in charge of them (not you, the big guy upstairs).

Your name is Crowbar. You mostly picked your own name because otherwise the Boss would've just called you Seven or something equally as unoriginal. To his credit it wasn't as if Crowbar was very original either but you preferred that over being named after a number. You can't quite remember where the name came from, whether you already had your favourite piece of maroon metal at the time or if you were given the weapon because of your name.

Not that it matters anymore. Origins on odd alien planets aside, your current job and focus is on the task you've been given to throw together some semblance of a team, not reminiscing over the old days when you were in a tunic instead of a suit and remembered far more about Charms than you do now.

The Doc has given you a job which involves wrangling together some of the fellas for some good old-fashioned robbery. Something about a warehouse with stuff that was originally stolen from the Midnight Crew by you fair and square, only now they've stolen it back and now you had to steal it right back again. It sounds complicated but the bottom line is go to Point A and retrieve Item B with as little mayhem as possible because the goods need to be intact.

You tap your trusty crowbar against your knuckles as you ponder, thinking about who would be best for the job considering the key phrase had been 'very little mayhem'.

Fin and Trace were usually a good match for anything robbery related, being able to see the comings and goings of anyone who could potentially interrupt them. Clover was an obvious choice, bastard was just a good luck charm by this point. Itchy could be useful, maybe Sawbuck or Quarters for some muscle. If they took Cans you'd need the bigger car and that would draw more attention. You hadn't been told to be stealthy, but with experience of what happened every other time you took people anywhere without telling them to at least try to be quiet there were usually more than a few stab wounds and bullet holes at the end of the day.

“Hey Crowbar!” You break from your thoughts abruptly by a yellow and green blur stopping suddenly in front of you. “Boss wants us to fuck up that warehouse, yeah? You’re takin’ me, yeah? I wanna stick it to that damn shortass for trippin’ me up last time! The nerve o’ that guy!!”

As always Itchy’s mouth ran as fast as his jittery legs and it takes a moment for your brain to even process what he said.

“We’re just gonna get our stuff back. In, out, no shenanigans.” You explain slowly, as if speaking any faster would mean he wouldn’t get the message.

“Aw man, no fightin’? No stabbin’? No bullets?” Itchy looks utterly disappointed, almost pouting even, like he was ready to just throw himself on the floor and have a brief tantrum over the matter, “Ah whatever, you still better be bringin’ me, maybe I can piss my name on their wall or something. Get creative. Anyway I’ll grab Clover ‘cause presume you want him too, right? See you at the car!”

Before you could reply Itchy zooms away again, leaving you to sigh and pinch the bridge of your nose.

Whether you want him to come or not, Itchy seems to have nominated himself candidate Number One for Operation... you aren’t sure what you’re calling it yet beyond ‘Get Shit Done Quick’ at the moment, so that name will have to do.

It meant Trace and Fin were off of the list though. As much as you would’ve loved their help, something about the two of them and Itchy was a bad combination in close quarters. Spread out across a turf war was fine, but when they had to be sneaky? No way.

You sigh again. Keeping tabs on all of these mooks was hard work. You felt like a drink. At least Itchy was taking care of the task of telling Clover. He really didn't want to deal with the frisky fella.

But that could wait. It seemed like you'd been walking while you were thinking and had ended up outside of Die's room. The weirdo's doll could be useful in a pinch, so you knocked on.

Die answers by peering through a tiny crack as he opens the door. The room behind him is dark, his eyes are wide, the usual startled expression if you were honest.

You open your mouth to tell him you had a job but his something makes you pause. Then frown. Then sigh. Again.

"I thought I told you to get rid of those damn chickens." You fix him with a stare that makes him wilt and almost close the door again until you manage to shove your foot in the way. "We got a job. Leave 'em and get movin'."

"..s...Cl.v...c..ng?" Die mumbled something, mouth hidden behind the door and only his eyes peering through at you.

"Die, speak up." You're losing patience, but it doesn't do any good to lose patience with Die, not when you need him for something.

"Is Clover coming...?" It's not much louder but it's audible this time.

"Probably. Li'l luck never hurt a mission." You answer, but no sooner than the words are out of your mouth does Die try slamming the door and completely forgetting you jammed your foot there to stop him the first time.

You howl as pain explodes through your limb, hopping on one leg and clutching your foot as Die stumbles back in shock and ends up on the floor in his sudden hurry to move away from your loud scream. The door flings wide open, revealing those god-damned chickens looking as startled as their captor does.

It's hard not to raise your voice at the always-jittery Sixth Hat of your team. Your foot more than damn smarts and you told him to get rid of those birds last week after someone left the door open and they were all over the mansion. Itchy wouldn't stop mocking the bastard for days, causing Die to be even more moody than usual, and Eggs and Biscuits constantly pouted over the fact they didn't have enough eggs from them to make an omelette despite being told they weren't the kind that laid eggs.

The headache you had brewing at the back of your skull throbs harder. You take another deep sigh to calm the storm of anger you knew you had bubbling somewhere as you lower your foot gingerly back to the floor.

"Why don't you want to be there if Clover is there?" You ask as calmly as you can through gritted teeth, pointedly not addressing the million other things you really should be addressing, but you were on a schedule here and a job needed doing.

"He keeps dancing next to me when I told him to stop and I don't like it..." Die mumbled from his sprawled position on the floor, fidgeting with his fingers and making no effort to get back up or do anything else other than sit there and look miserable.

"He does it with everyone, you know he does." You try to reason even though Clover's jigs grate the last of your nerves as well. Smutty shrimp can't keep two feet on the ground for more than five seconds, it was just one of the many Fun Felt Facts that everyone had to accept and you all had your own way of dealing with the cheeky midget.

“Well I don’t want to go if he’s going...” The green-hatted green man trails off, words becoming almost illegible. Thankfully you’re used to the way Die speaks and have more or less picked up a keen sense of hearing just for his voice alone because of it. You could probably pinpoint his wails of anguish through five rooms or more considering how often he whines about things.

“Clover needs to come. You need to come. Itchy is gonna be there and since both of them have twitchy feet they’ll probably be distractions for each other.” You again try to reason, and after a few moments of silence Die finally nods in agreement. You inwardly breathe a sigh of relief.

Probably didn’t help Die that you had stared at him unblinkingly until he was squirming with discomfort. That trick always worked. Die always caved under pressure.

“We’re heading out in ten minutes. Clean up, and meet us in the garage. Don’t be late.” You fix him with a final stare, receive another dejected nod in response, before limping away from the room as you slam the door behind you. The numerous chickens give out a startled indignant squawk which you ignore. You can deal with that later.

You sigh. Again. You tend to sigh a lot when trying to wrangle these moronic maroons that give your colour a bad name. You can feel the headache once more in the back of your skull and promise it that if the job went down successfully you’d treat it to an even worse headache, but one that was the result of a hangover and good booze instead of stress and incompetence.

Mentally you went through your checklist of things you needed for the job. Clover for luck, Itchy for speed, Die for any sort of escape route, you just needed a little bit of muscle in case things got ugly, though not too much that couldn’t fit in the smaller and easier-to-hide car.

Quarters was a good choice, and they had a way around having to cart his large ass too and from the warehouse with his oxymoron of a huge minigun in the form of the quarter that Quarters always let Clover keep. It would be polite to give the guy a heads up however.

Thankfully you find Quarters in the lounge playing table stickball with Matchsticks. It takes no time at all to say to him that you're taking some of the fellas on a job and Clover's coin was a back-up in case he needed to be switched out. Quarters looks unamused but agrees anyway, saying he never leaves his gun far behind him anyway.

He gestures over to the booth seat nearby, where said huge minigun is sitting comfortably on the leather seats. You decide not to comment about the unhealthy fixation the man has on his gun, just grateful he didn't kick up a fuss over being on 'standby' for a fight.

That was far easier than you expected it to be and you're relieved. After the whirlwind of You check your watch. Almost showtime.

You check you have your crowbar, straight your hat and collar, and head down to the garage where Itchy is already waiting by the car. The impatient tap of his foot is far faster than any normal person's and simply sounds like a woodpecker hammering on the concrete instead of a shoe simply tapping.

"About time you got here, when are we-" Itchy starts verbally vomiting speed at you before you cut him off sharply.

"Five minutes. Quarters is on standby. Let's get this over with so I can have a drink before the sun comes up." You frown and stare at him, watching a grin quickly spread on the other's face and a couple of victory laps are run around the car.

It doesn't take long for Clover to turn up, and you have to fix both of them with a judgmental glare for them to keep both feet on the ground. You have no idea what

happened when Itchy went to get him but they seem to share some kind of look between them that just screams mischief. You don't ask.

Die shows up not long after, clearly keeping a far distance from the short purple-hatted one as he very obviously keeps a comical several feet between them.

"Right, quick in and out. We grab it, and leave. Got it?" You tell them all sharply as you get into the driver's seat, watching as Die slides in the front next to you and the other two in the back.

"That's what he said, boss!" Itchy cackles, and you roll your eyes.

You sigh. You hope this will all be over soon, but knowing your team it probably won't be.

That's what it was like being the third in command, leader of the Felt, the one who knew these mooks the best and who could get the job done in the most competent way possible.

As you start up the car part of you wishes that they were just a little easier to deal with, but after all these years you knew how all of them worked, what made them all tick, how to keep the cogs whirring in this fucked up grandfather clock metaphor you were using to describe them. If they were any different you wouldn't know how to kick it back into shape.

Your name is Crowbar, the seventh hat of the Felt, the third in command, and the only person who knew how to keep your team in line.

Misplaced in Purpose

by Skyeec2

Content warnings: *mentions of blood*

A strike. An attack against his person and Sawbuck draws into himself, flinching at the harm that he can't quite feel through the thickness of his skin. He blinks, eyes soft and sorrowful as he looked to the individual that had attempted harm against him this time.

It's just Fin. Eyes narrowed as he stares at the green fabric of Sawbuck's suit, parted and frayed from the knife that'd been stuck into his side.

"Would you kindly STOP ruining everyone's suits, Number Five?"

Sawbuck turned to the voice, not too surprised that Stitch had spoken up more at the damage to his suit than any harm, perceived or otherwise, to Sawbuck himself.

He opened his mouth, preparing himself to speak up around his overbite, but was quickly cut off by Fin.

"Of come off it!" Rolling eyes accompanied a dismissive wave of Fin's hand as he stepped around Sawbuck's bulk to better see the crossed arms and narrowed gaze of Stitch on the other side of the room. "It's not like he felt it anyway if he had then we'd be hours away, Number Nine."

He was right. They would have been sent hours, days, weeks or even months or years either forwards or backward through time if he'd actually been harmed by the poke! It... wasn't like Sawbuck actually had much control over anything regarding his particular brand of abilities. There were quite a few of them that didn't have much control over their specific abilities, but that was fine, they all found their own ways to be useful to The Doctor and the rest of the Felt.

The fact that Sawbuck's own use lay in his ability to withstand harm and stall enemies was an unfortunate one when combined with his more skittish and non-confronting personality. But it was the best way for him to be of use so he would do his best to do what was needed of him when the time called for it.

Like tonight, where he was supposed to go with some of the others, Trace and Itchy this time, to help them fend off anyone that caught wind of what they were getting up to for The Doctor and decided to try to do something to interrupt and interfere with them. This hopefully wouldn't happen but Sawbuck knew better than to hope for something like that with the thorn that was The Midnight Crew lurking out in the street like ants under their feet.

Neither Itchy nor Trace had seemed so worried when The Doctor had given them the job though, so he would do his best to follow in their lead.

They were both always so much more sure and confident when it came to completing the tasks given to them by The Doctor, Sawbuck meanwhile was still pretending at feeling the same until he was actually able to. Just as Clover said he should.

Fin and Stitch seemed to have continued their argument even as Sawbuck ignored them for his own thoughts, the two of them noticeably becoming more heated as they started to speak in quicker and shorter sentences.

Sawbuck didn't really want to bother with separating them or dealing with their antics though so he was simply going to leave the room. No reason to attempt to be sneaky or anything of the like, it wasn't as if it would work overly well considering his bulk and the size of the doorways in comparison.

They didn't really notice anyways and he was able to leave the room and their back and forth argument without drawing their attention to the fact that he was, saving him from figuring out how to side with neither of them while they spat words at each other over his head.

It was time to make his way back to the entrance of the mansion, where Trace and Itchy were waiting for him.

"Sorry for—" He doesn't get much of a chance to say anything else before Itchy is rushing in and interrupting him in his usual fashion.

"Sorry for keeping us waiting?" Well, you should be because we've been waiting over three minutes for you to arrive which is two minutes too long for me when we could have already been on our way and doing what The Doc's asking us to so that we can come back before everything closes again and—"

"Are you ready?" Trace butts in as Itchy only continued to talk, his words coming faster and faster until they were a slur of sounds and noises that Sawbuck couldn't

quite make sense of. Trace was much easier though, nothing too overly difficult to deal with there.

“Yes!” He flinched at the volume of his own voice as he jumped to answer Trace’s question, knowing just how eager that would make him seem to the other Felt members. “I’m sorry again for—”

“Nothing to be concerned over,” Trace waved him off, adjusting the set of the hat on his own head before he folded the cuff of his suit over his wrist. “We’ve time to spare despite what Itchy would have you think, it’s not like you’re any slower than Doze anyway.” He turned to the door, side-eyeing Itchy who had started to pace alongside his chattering. “Come along now, if you want to get back before daybreak then we should go now.”

Sawbuck swallowed, watching Itchy pause in his motions and talking all together\ at Trace’s words to roll his eyes before following him out of the mansion’s doors. Sawbuck could only wish to have that much pull and confidence when he talked to the others of the Felt, perhaps he’d be lucky and figure it out alongside being confident in himself and his ability to assist in jobs, only time would tell.

He followed the two of them outside of the mansion, to the car that one of the others must have pulled around to the front earlier, climbing carefully into the

backseat after the other two made themselves comfortable in the front. He looked between them both, swallowing heavily before leaning back carefully in the seat, focusing on the street passing them.

There’s silence, a lingering, dragging quiet before he’s unable to take it and decides to try to break it.

“Do you think—” “Do we think what? Spit it out!” “He’s trying, you’re being impatient.” “Oh shut up.” “—that we’ll run into the Crew tonight?”

Itchy looks like he’s about to launch into another spiel of words but Trace cuts in before he can start.

“It’s more than possible,” he looked back at Sawbuck through the mirror, raising a brow at his cramped and uncomfortable appearance where he was squished into the back of the car. “They do like to put themselves into our business don’t they?”

“Yeah they do the cockroaches,” Itchy muttered from the front seat, thankfully unable to speed more than he already was because of The Doctor’s warnings hanging over their heads when it came to the fragility of vehicles. “Don’t worry though Sawbuck that’s what you’re here for!” Itchy grinned at him through the mirror, a sharp, quick thing full of manic energy like the rest of him was. “They don’t know how to handle you and even if they did figure something out you’d both just end up in the next week am I right?”

Sawbuck feels himself swell at the vote of confidence from Itchy, the trust that the other was putting into his ability to do what was needed to ensure they could do what The Doctor was expecting them to. Whatever that was. He wasn’t really sure about that considering he was there to be a deterrent and wall to the Midnight Crew and little else.

He was going to be the best deterrent he could possibly be though.

“Exactly!” He agreed, returning Itchy’s smile in the mirror, ignoring Trace’s fond sigh of exaggeration as well as the knowledge that should such a thing come to pass, it would lead to him being stranded in a different point and time with The

Midnight Crew. “They won’t be able to do anything to you guys; I’ll make sure of it! I promise!”

“Hell yeah you will we’ll get in and out before we know it and get drinks later won’t we Trace?” Itchy doesn’t even bother to give the illusion that Trace could answer before he’s off and talking again, just slow enough for Sawbuck to still be able to understand everything coming out of his mouth. “I mean aside from the fact that you’re like an actual real-life-stick-in-the-mud of course can’t forget that can we Sawbuck? Number Three doesn’t like fun or engaging with the rest of us other than his little trail buddy Number Five like they’re better than the rest of us even though I’m sure you and I could drink them under the table any night and—”

Sawbuck listened to Itchy as he continued to rant and ramble for the whole duration of the drive to the other side of town, far enough from anything that could be considered Midnight Crew territory, though he was sure that wouldn’t stop them from showing up, it never did after all.

Unfortunately, he was right.

They were expecting Hearts Boxcars and Spades Slick to show up, of course they were, they would have been stupid not to expect at least one, if not more, of the Midnight Crew to appear and ruin their job.

And it fell to Sawbuck to keep them occupied while Trace and Itchy did what they needed to do for The Doctor.

He could do that. He could.

They were both very dangerous individuals though, each deadly in their own rights and Sawbuck was more than aware of that, more than aware of the danger they presented to him and the others. The danger he needed to protect the others from.

He held himself between the two enemies and the doorway leading to where Itchy and Trace were working, his girth blocking the doorway and stalling the two

Midnight Crew members. He wouldn't let them get past him; he wouldn't let them hurt the other two.

They were counting on him and he wasn't going to let them down.

But Spades Slick and Hearts Boxcars were both very dangerous individuals and Sawbuck wasn't much of a threat to them, now when his abilities lay so much more towards stalling and defensive measures instead of offensive, like so many of the others within the Felt. He was going to do his best though, or else he would be classed as unneeded and replaced by The Doctor, a fate they were all avoiding.

The sheer thickness of his skin saved him from feeling much of what the two were doing to him, Slicks' knife wasn't able to cut through his skin despite tearing through the fabric of his suit like warm butter and Boxcars' bullets ricochet off of him completely. They were persistent, unrelenting in their attacks but Sawbuck didn't feel anything.

Until he did.

Burning pain in his flank and Sawbuck flinches, only getting to start to yell out a warning to the other two before he and Spades Slick disappear from the current point in time to a different one.

There's no one but he and Slick there whenever they've been brought to, nothing to let him know if it's the past or future or if Itchy and Trace were able to complete their given task.

Slick is raging, he hates anything related to time shenanigans, but Sawbuck is more concerned with clutching his bleeding side, the knife that had pierced him yanked out harshly by Slick once they'd appeared at this point in time.

His hand's warm.

The wound ragged and bleeding freely. It hurts.

He needs to get out of there, to make his way back to the Felt manor and hope he can make it in time to avoid bleeding out. Or that Stitch notices the tear in his mannequin in time to fix it.

But first, he needs to deal with Slick.

The Leader of the Midnight Crew hadn't been too concerned about Sawbuck's shotgun before, not with Boxcars at his side and the others of his Crew no doubt ready to come to aid should they be needed, but now on his own, misplaced from time, it was a different matter altogether.

Sawbuck raised his weapon, spreading the blood from his side against the gunmetal as he aimed it at Slick, forcing himself to focus past the agony of the movement.

It was time to decide exactly how this was going to play out.

Sawbuck needed to find out if he'd brought Itchy and Trace enough time to do what they needed and get out unharmed.

He needed to know if he'd failed them or not. He needed to...

It's Not Your Job to Think

by ashford2ashford

It's not Cans' job to think...

It's not your job to think...but you do.

Thinking is usually reserved for Crowbar or the Doc (the head honcho collective shall we say), but it would be something cruel and twisted to assume that all of you mooks simply don't think at all.

You have thoughts. Feelings. More inside that body of yours than solid muscle. When you press one massive shovel-like hand to your chest you can feel it there: the beating of your heart.

Proof of life. Of blood and veins and all of those things that keep a leprechaun like you alive and kicking people into different timelines.

It's not your job to think, but you can't deny that your entrances are well planned out and meticulously crafted. At the ring of a bell you can make your presence known in a rush of rubble and the thunderous sound of your fist meeting masonry.

Oh yeah.

If pressed, you can say that your heart swells with pride to see the startled gawping faces that have everything to fear once you crash into the room. Clattering pebbles that were once solid brick are almost like an applause as they rain down to the floor. A moment to pause and let the dust settle; a moment to appreciate the silence that falls.

Then all out brawling.

It's not your job to think, but you can appreciate the little things in life. Fists slamming into guts; bones crunching and cracking once they meet bare knuckle; the wounded gasps and sudden realisation that the next time your unfortunate victim opens their eyes they won't even be able to tell what year it is.

It's almost poetic (well, as poetic as a fight can be).

You've seen your fair share of fancy fleet-footed scrappy little guys. All of them fall to your unique way of asserting yourself in the pecking order. Itchy can brag all he wants about his speed, but you definitely know where you stand in this happy little gang of yours, and it certainly ain't where your number would suggest. As far as you're concerned, the number is more indicative of the threat level (gets a little sketchy around twelve and thirteen, mind, but those two dumbasses certainly can cause problems when they need to).

It's not that you look down on your fellow green associates - in fact, you can't really help it given your impressive weight and height - not in the slightest. No. It's more that you are aware of your own strength.

Modesty aside, there's no denying it: you are one of the bigger (literally and metaphorically) threats within The Felt.

It's not your job to think, but sometimes you believe that your reputation as a big dumb brute comes from the constant ebb and flow of time in this place. Crowbar is snappy. He is a man who has to deal with so many different speeds and orders and thoughts and feelings and people and places. So much so that he barks an order and then gets irritated when you don't quite catch it the first time. Curls back his lips and bares his teeth a little as he repeats the order with fewer syllables.

Fact is: he mumbles. A lot.

So much so that it makes getting his orders right the first time round is a god-damned miracle. Understanding what he's saying when he's deep in thought is rarer than finding a unicorn.

In his eyes, you're the muscle and he's the brains, and you're inclined to agree. The orders go through him and him alone. Doc says it's because his head wouldn't and doesn't explode at the thought of looking outside of the current meta narrative. You say: huh. You guess so. If the Doc says it, it's law.

It's not your job to think, but you often muse on things when you're not smashing through the walls Kool-Aid Man style. Mainly, you think of things to do, things to say, conversations you should have had, might have, would have had.

You've often stopped to express a stray thought in Doze's general direction, before realizing that it would probably take a million years to register, but no one can blame you for trying.

Sometimes you try to catch a word in with Fin or Trace, but those two are always looking both forwards and backwards at the same time to really pay any attention to the present.

The only one you seem to be able to catch for a sentence every now and then is Clover. Of course, the little sneak is more interested in pursuing one of his (several) romantic charms with everything that moves (you once swore he was trying on balloons with you when you were trying to answer his recent time-related riddle, but you can never be too sure with him - plus you're more of a rainbows guy when it comes to your own relationships). And yet, even with his flirtatious nature, Clover is fun to talk with when you're not being used as the battering ram and he's not being used as the distraction.

Sometimes it's literally the little things in life that keep you going. If you didn't have some form of conversation, you'd go mad. Who wouldn't? You've been stuck alone on a planet before. You need to keep and appreciate the company you have.

It's not your job to think, but you do and you will. Often. About all kinds of things.

Right now, you're listening out for the tell tale cue that will signal your arrival into the safe room (as in the room with the safe inside, not the safest room in the house, for that would imply you're about to burst in on the Doc's latest monologue) and flexing your hands to make sure that the next person you punch will certainly be feeling it for the next year or so.

The mansion around you is alive with the sounds of gunfire and bomb explosions and shouting. You know that the Midnight Crew are here and meaning all kinds of business, but you're also here and are more than capable of showing them exactly how you conduct business of your own. It's funny: you're kinda excited. Making an entrance is your speciality.

Playing the big dumb brute is worth it to have the best dramatic timing in the whole city - nay, the whole damn desert!

You're practically grinning as you start to race towards the wall, every step thudding loudly upon the floor, the entire mansion rumbling as you move with the speed and power of a freight train towards the nearest wall.

So you're not the guy whose job it is to think...but you certainly excel at what you do know. And you know how to make an entrance.

Oh yeah.

Eulogy for the Tritagonist

by MafagafoGirl

Content warnings: *alcoholism, drug abuse*

You remember the first time people told you you weren't cut out for something. When you were in pawn school, learning things and making friends, and you were well on your way to become a great student; you love to read books, see, and you love to learn things. You don't always retain all that information, but it's always nice to sit down with a book and hyperfocus until you were kicked out by the librarian and told to go home to your mothers.

So you were quite a bit surprised when you reached secondary school and you were not sent to the most advanced classes. You asked your teachers, you asked your parents, and the only answer they gave you was you weren't cut out for it. What happened, did you do something wrong? Has there been a mistake? Were your grades not good enough?

It took you a lot of nagging for them to finally spill out that it's because you're a buffoon, the lowest subcaste of pawn out there. You were cloned to be a Courtyard Droll, and nothing else, and because of that, they wouldn't give you a chair in advanced classes if it meant you were taking the place that could be filled by another young carapace who would grow up to be a doctor, or a scientist, or a member of the royal court. It didn't sting at first, not as much as you thought it would, because you were still allowed to attend science clubs, and spend your after school time at the library, and although everyone else saw you as nothing but a tiny little clown, you still found joy between similarly-minded teenagers and dusty shelves. For some precious few years, you could pretend you wouldn't have the most frivolous and expendable job out there, you could pretend your life wouldn't be measured by how many laughs you could make the Queen croak up.

Only when you were given your job, however, is that it truly downed on you just how much it meant to be a buffoon. When you said goodbye to your parents, and set foot

into the Droll quarters in the staff portion of the capital's royal complex, and you were just met with that sea of carapaces that, all things considered, looked almost identical to you. Some were plumper, some were taller, some were even a bit stouter than you, but you all shared the same voice range, the same overall physique, the same mannerisms, the same forgetful and easily confused mindspace, and suddenly you weren't the little funny kid who could make a science pun on the spot, you were the weird one that made jokes nobody else understood.

Of course, every one of the Drolls were good at making jokes, and the little identity you had was which kind of joke you were the best at, but even then it wasn't much to go for. You collected hats to find solace in your life as just another clown in the company; it made you feel special again. You were the droll with the tower of hats.

It wasn't a bad life, for sure. You lived off the taxpayers' money, didn't have to pay rent, and won a little pension at the end of the month to buy "lollipops, or root beer, or whatever the hell your kind is into", according to the Archagent. The Archagent was mean and aloof, and to call him a workaholic would be an understatement. But you could see, on the rare opportunity he stepped out for a cigarette, that he absolutely hated the life he lead. His eyes were full of hatred, for the floor he stood on, the person he served, the busywork he had to do. It seemed like he felt he could be so much more than he was, and this encouraged you to talk to him.

Over the years, you nurtured a casual friendship with him, every time you managed to find him out. It made the unbearability of interacting with nigh-identical copies of yourself every day somewhat tolerable, and he found your anti-jokes hilarious. One day, you vent out how hopelessly unlike yourself you feel, among all the same Courtyard Drolls, and he lets out how he, too, wants change. And if you want in, all you need is to say the word. He'd have your back if you had his.

So, some good three months later, you two, plus the other bishop, and a rook the Archagent recruited, were fleeing on the last shuttle out of Derse in direction to exile; you planted a few explosives around the capital and set it out to blow the whole place up to smithereens, like your new boss told you. Maybe a few too much. Soon enough,

if your estimatives were right, there would be no more Derse, and there would be no more Prospit either, if Derse was really knocked out of its place and en route to collide with the yellow moon. So you all fled, to the deserted planet below, to escape probable doom.

What can you say, you have a hell of a gift for eyeballing things.

You are now the Cheery Drifter. The scalding sun is almost unbearable, and the unending sea of pink and blue unsettled sand makes your calves ache with every step that makes you sink in up to your knees. You feel like you have no support, and you often fall and get sand all over your rags and your cheeks. However tired you might be, at least you're not alone. The Heartless Bandit, the Depraved Deadbeat and the Scurrilous Straggler (and his pack of dogs) accompany you. From the inhospitable environment to the lurking creatures of the night, it's clear to you that this place should not be inhabited by anyone. Yet, the Straggler keeps on going.

He wanted to build a city, he said, and he wanted to build it just in the right place. He could never explain what he wanted, but he always spat out that he'd know when he saw it. For you, it sounded like you were all just tramping in the desert and surviving off scraps and raw meat all the way towards your certain doom. Nevertheless, you keep walking with them, because really, surviving with friends is much more likely to happen than surviving by yourself. You might be stupid, but you're not dumb.

From collecting hats, you escalated to collecting... Anything, really. Any shiny scrap, any sand-eroded article of clothing, any book nearly unintelligible from the apparent millenia it spent untouched. Collecting things made you feel important. Made you feel unique. You could build things with some of them, and invent lore to pass the time around the fire pit in the cold desert nights, which the rest of your crew enjoyed listening to in different degrees. Chances were if any of them needed a knick knack, Cheery Drifter had it, and Cheery Drifter could help them. It felt good to you, for once in your life, to feel like you were actually crucial to your social circle.

With cruciality and social ties came another thing you've never experienced in your life: communion. When the sandstorm was too harsh to endure, when your stubby legs struggled to get over a dune, when the sand went in your joints and ground against their bare skin until it was impossible to move, there was always someone there to help you up, to give you support, to carry you until you all could rest, and, almost invariably, that person was your friend Heartless Bandit. The way he smiled down amicably at you when carrying you on his arms, the way his small slits of eyes watched with curiosity while you babbled about your interests around the fire, it irradiated such fondness that made you feel loved, and safe, and protected.

You couldn't help but reciprocate those feelings, to calm his nerves when you were all desolate and had to sacrifice a (nother) dog to make sure you'd not travel hungry the next day, to hold his fingers tenderly when you were all sharing stories around the fire, to have the sort of emotional connection both of you lacked in your previous life. The big guy might've called himself heartless, but he had enough love in him to last an eternity.

He protected your tiny, fragile body from the harshness of desert, and you gave support for someone who'd never received any; the perfect moirallegiance. Your counterparts, lazy beanpole and angry stabhappy bum, didn't have such an easy time figuring out what their relationship was, even though you tried playing cupid here and there to no avail.

Either way, the four of you carried on, walking over sand dunes, seeking shelter in ruins corroded by time, losing dogs from the pack to the storms and famine, until the Straggler stopped near a rock formation, casting a shadow over a space that, if you were to guess, was literally the same as everywhere else; but he said it was here, and he was absolutely sure of that, so you listened to your boss and you settled, carrying materials and building huts.

Soon, people followed.

You are now Clubs Deuce, and many years have passed since you and Boxcars started building huts out of wood pieces and metal scrap under the supervision of Spades Slick, and underwhelming support of Diamonds Droog. Soon, walkways of packed sand became asphalted roads, and simple, fragile huts became houses, buildings, mansions. You don't take the merit for anything, really - you were just doing what you were told. The buzz of the city was familiar to you, and yet something new and a novelty that you surely appreciated during the nights.

None of you had a penchant for the official organization and the bureaucracies of being leaders of your new city-state - not even your boss himself, who only did what he did to avoid bureaucracy anyway - so you all handed down leadership to the first freeloader with affinity for politics and retired to live in the recently built sewers, first literally, then figuratively, operating your own business more or less parallel to the government. Suddenly, the kind of stuff you did was illegal, and once again your Crew resorted to scheming in the shadows and keeping a low profile. But not for long.

It wasn't for long because word always goes around, and despite hating being part of government your boss found himself as the forefront face of your outfit, terrorizing minor criminals and speakeasy owners alike. The four of you built a network, a name for yourselves, and, in due time, families, and you were no exception. Boxcars was great company for sure, especially when you needed support, but things were different with your wife, when you met her; you two connected like you've never connected to anyone before, or since, and you could never explain why a woman so beautiful like her would feel attracted to a guy so silly like yourself, enough to consider marriage and offspring. Life was good, then, for you. You were at your prime.

Sometimes, when you reflect on it, you think about the scope of life and it dawns on you how long it is and how many things happen in it. Even if you stepped back a bit, you think you wouldn't be able to fully process everything that happens all at once. It took time and patience, to get anywhere, because next to the infinity of life, you feel

like a small little ant walking on a giant, seemingly infinite dinner table, looking for scraps, and that's not only because you're 4 feet tall.

You felt tiny too, that fateful day you went into the hospital with a wife and left without one. Tiny because nobody offered you anything besides a word of condolences and a pat on the back. Tiny because you stood there, in front of the double doors, facing the street, and people just walked by you without asking what was wrong. This wouldn't happen on Derse, because in a clockwork society nobody stops without a good reason, and if someone stops they need to be given a push to get back to work so the clock doesn't break. Midnight City wasn't a clockwork society. This was the only real time that you ever missed it, actually.

Midnight City was a place where you didn't have to be bound by your caste, or by your job. You could be anyone you wanted. And yet, you suddenly felt like you were chained down, and not able to be who you chose to be, the strong, smart mobster, the wise, caring father. You were just a buffoon in a hat, who had to come home, look down to two kids and tell them they didn't have a mommy anymore. You were the clown that put them to bed, and that let them sleep on yours fifteen minutes later. You were, as you looked in the mirror after getting up from bed, a fraud, you weren't cut out for doing this, at least not by yourself. Getting up at seven in the morning, getting kids out of bed and out to school, then sit back at the couch and... Stare at the mantle for a few hours until the kids came home. Looking at your wedding picture, fixating on it even though nothing substantial went across your mind at all. It made time go faster, even when you were full of stuff to do. You couldn't be bothered to do it, hypnotized you were staring at the mantle.

Of course, you're not a stranger to alcohol. You make the stuff, anyway, and you can hold your liquor pretty well. More than ever, it felt a rather attractive idea to lock yourself in your shed, with your chemicals and prototypes and knicks and knacks, and have some shots of the barrel of distilled you kept buried under some mildly organized bomb materials until you passed out on your desk. Made time go even faster, to just sit there with your forehead on the rough wood surface, until a tiny someone knocked on the door and told you it was dinnertime. Then you, hungover at 6 PM, would pop an Advil, or two or three, and cook what you could for the three of you, and then stay

up late not really doing anything until you passed out. The kids noticed you were spiraling out of control; of course they did, they're not stupid. But they didn't know how to help, surrounded they were by their own individual versions of grief. You became irritable, and distant, and if there was one thing they feared was whenever you felt like you needed to raise your voice to get your point across; it crushed your heart to see them recoil back and grow silent, or run away to their rooms, because you weren't in the mood to cater to their child quirks.

Soon enough, the Crew noticed what was happening too, even if you told them everything was okay. You can't help but be an open book, and they couldn't say they didn't notice how vaguely present you always were, how snappy you became, how you looked tired almost every day. Boxcars came to your aid, as he did so many times before, letting you rest, taking some of the responsibility you had off of your back and onto his own. You told him there was no need, that this was really just a phase that you would get out of soon. He said that he didn't see it. That if you didn't let anyone help you this would just become routine, and he hated to see someone that brought so much joy into his life to be so despondent like that. It felt very, very wrong.

He was right. So you let him help.

Life takes turns between being good and bad. You've learned this perhaps the hard way, but then you've come to understand that neither of these two aspects hog your life forever. Being miserable and being ecstatic are temporary feelings, that come and go, replace each other, resignify things in your life, forming a complicated and cathartic dance of highs and lows.

You are not Clubs Deuce anymore. You're not the Courtyard Droll, nor the Cheery Drifter. You simply are, now that you've closed your eyes and found the Door to the Afterlife. Here, it is quiet, it is calm, you can sit down, have some tea, and take a well earned rest. You didn't die young

- not as young as other people like you did. You got to see your children grow, you got to play with your grandchildren, you were able to reap the fruit of the seeds your Crew planted long ago, as the City grew, as more cities formed, as the world became more and more livable. Despite everything, it was a good life.

You participated in a lot of things, and were a key player in many historical events; they don't talk about you in History books, though - not that you wish they did, anyway. When it came to public attention, you were always in the shadow of your boss and his right-hand, and that didn't matter for you in the slightest. You content yourself with being the Tritagonist, a helping hand, just beside the spotlight, because this kind of thing doesn't matter to you, and it's weird, considering you've battled a third of your life to be anything else but a common everyman. You've figured out that what was important to you was to know who you were, not that other people knew who you were. And you came to know that - pretty well even. So for that matter, you didn't care about being denied credit on things.

Sometimes, you like to think about what sort of Eulogy people did for you, when you passed. You thought it wouldn't feature everything you did, that would make the speech so long! But it would feature what you were, the building blocks of your character. What you were, what you came to be, and what you meant for other people. It makes you smile fondly.

Truthfully, you couldn't hope for anything more appropriate.

A New Broom Sweeps the Cleanest

by oncesewerezombies

Content warnings: *references to canon typical violence, dysfunctional found family, offensive language, Intermision style*

Diamond Droog does a spot of spring cleaning around the Midnight Crew's abode. Or, how the Midnight Crew got a new hideout.

This place is a fucking dump, is what you got to say about the state of the hideout, and you say as much out loud to the lounging schmucks hanging out in the central room on the comfortslab, one hand resting irritably on your hip as you look around at all the mess. It's true that you're all hard men, men with pasts, men who have no truck with what most of the world considers civilised behaviour, but that doesn't mean that you have to be animals. And right now, you're looking at three of the biggest monkeys in the zoo, complete with shit flinging habits. Makes you sick.

It's fine, comes a stolid grunt from one of the couch's inhabitants and your lip quirks into a sneer, because it ain't fine, ain't fine at all. Ain't in the mood to go around being your maid, boys, you snipe because that's true as much as the first thing you'd said, only to get Boxcars acting like he doesn't know what you're on about. He just groans, loudly and leans his head back to look at the ceiling. Well, what do you expect us to do about it then? Not like we can hire a dame to come in here and swing a duster around.

Wouldn't need to clean the hideout if we exploded the hideout, chimes in a chirpy little voice. Hearts raises his hand and smooshes his palm over Deuce's entire face, shutting him up. Sorta. He's still making complaining noises behind Hearts' mitt. You shoulda expected that kinda interjection coming from the peanut gallery, that's what you're thinking to yourself but you soldier on all the same. Before you get the chance to weigh in on again how you think someone else around here out to be kicking in some weight on the whole domestic issue, Slick's voice impinges itself on your fucking

consciousness. Won't say no if you decide to put on the right kinda fancy frilly duds to go with this urge to get things spick 'n span, Droog.

Funny, boss, you say blandly, after a moment of surging rage that lights up your pumper. Maybe you're the youngest out of the rest of them, but that doesn't mean you gotta take this shit. Your voice is cool but you ain't that great at hiding it when you're spitting mad; leastways Slick always

seems to know. He grins horribly at you from his place on the couch, while Deuce is still squirming and complaining with Hearts' hand over his whole face. Real funny, huh.

I thought so, he comments and digs underneath one of his claws with a small, slim knife. Where does he hide all those blades. Who knows, except for Slick. It's a gimmick, because realistically it's not possible for one man to carry that many fucking pigstickers on him without any of them showing. A god damn mystery for the ages, and one you're not keen on getting to the bottom of. What's eating you, anyways.

I don't like living in squalor, you say coolly. You look around you, at the undusted architraves and skirting boards, and your lip curls up with undisguised contempt. The disgust you feel is a positive palpitation inside your thorax, throbbing away with displeasure at the uncivilised ways of your adoptive clutch. You make a point of mentioning to the room that this isn't what you agreed to.

Isn't it, Slick snipes back and surges up from the couch to come over and prod a rude finger into the underpinnings of your waistcoat. With a huff, you step aside and he makes a point of following you. He really is a fucking asshole, you don't know why you put up with him.

You agreed to whatever the fuck I tell you you're gonna do, Diamonds. And you fucking know it.

You make a thoughtful noise, and continue keeping ahead of him so he can't jam another impudent digit into your belly. The other problem with Slick is, of course, that the next time he jabs you, it just might be with a knife. It wouldn't be the first time. It's a good thing you're a slick hand with a needle and thread, as well as a pool cue. You hadn't expected a knack with tailoring to be useful to more than just your wardrobe.

It's not that bad, comes the rumble of Hearts from behind you as you leave the room, and you scoff acidly to yourself, not bothering to dignify that fucking foolish comment of his with a god damn reply. Sometimes you wonder why you don't just leave, but there's always something that keeps you coming around despite what would actually be easiest for you. At least they dress well enough. You'd really have to leave if they stopped wearing some sort of respectable suit on a nightly basis; you just wouldn't be able to stomach being seen with them if they were badly dressed. A mobster you might fucking well be, but you've got some god damn standards.

Coming to a halt outside of your room, you turn with a slight yet dramatic flare of your jacket to look down at Slick. As always, he stares up at you and sneers, like he was the one who was actually taller in this here equation of tallness measuring.

Little prick. You'd hate him if you didn't know better.

What. Just a flat word falling from your lips tonelessly, but you think it's enough to let Slick know your feelings. His lip curls, revealing jagged teeth - his sneer sure is getting a work out tonight.

Your mug's gonna stick that way, you keep making that face, is what you tell him. You pause, thoughtful as he swells up a bit with anger. Don't know if we'd really notice, you're ugly as it is.

This time, he does stab you and honestly? You deserve it. Talking back is one thing, but that comment was just uncivil. Grunting, you take the white-hot slice of pain through your forearm with equanimity and examine your cut sleeve with a sigh of annoyance. Really. You'd liked this suit, but it looks like you need a new jacket now.

You done, you inquire frostily.

Are you done, he snaps back like you're both somehow grubs or wigglers or something, even though you'd both come outta the clone tube as big as you are right now like a rational being oughta. It's the only way to jive, you don't know how anyone else goes through the whole baby business. You reckon it's laziness, personally, but you got an irate boss in front of you to deal with so you shut down your internal philosophising and wait for him to do something. He's got something ticking away in his cranium, you know the signs. By now, you're real fucking familiar with all of his little ticks and ways, what they mean. You've made a habit outta knowing; you reckon by now you know him better than he knows himself.

Slick draws his hand back, sliding it over the gleaming arch of his head and you wait for him to spit out what else is on his mind.

Got a job tomorrow night.

Alright. You wait a beat and he doesn't say anything more about whatever the fuck his beef is, so you open the door to your room and make to move inside. Since he ain't explaining more, you assume it's just another job like a lot of the other ones you've done lately. More stuff that means this den of squalor ain't getting any cleaner, is what it really fucking means but you tuck your internal snarl down real good and tight and make sure it stays fucking internal. Good night, boss.

He doesn't say anything to your back, and surprisingly you don't even hear a grumble when you gently shut the door behind you. Easing your jacket off your shoulders, you study the cut and blood staining in the sleeve of your shirt and shake your head a little

as you hang it on its waiting valet stand. Good thing you wear all black. Sliding your suspender straps off your shoulders to fall around your hips, you sit down on your bed as you shrug off the shirt and settle into stitching it up with what's in your housewife, pulling needle from canvas and letting out a deep sigh of irritation.

You don't like mess. You don't enjoy effort. And being the only one in the Midnight Crew who's interested in maintaining your common domicile to even a barely acceptable minimum standard is putting you to way too much fucking effort. Even being pissed about the current state of affairs is taking more cash from your billfold than you want.

Something that was said tonight nags and pricks at you as you sew up your shirt, your jacket and yourself. You don't know what it was, precisely, only that it's important. That it'll mean something to you - once you figure out what the fuck it was.

It's later when you figure it out. You know you would, eventually. You're a man who knows his mind - sometimes it just takes a while to get to the bottom of it.

You decide to give the galoots you jive around with a chance to change their fucking tune, maybe start picking up their odiferous fucking walkstubs. Wash a plate. You know, basic tasks of domestic hygiene that you'd have thought anyone coulda managed. That you should be able to expect them to do. You've made your thoughts known, if they're wise they'll start picking up their act a smidge.

And they don't.

So you do something about it.

You did warn them. Ain't your fault if they didn't take it (and you) seriously.

Fingers almost pressed to your mouth, you inhale cigarette smoke and lean against the car decoratively as the other three act like they're surprised to find the formerly derelict house you'd all been using as a hideout busily getting to the torrid affair of burning to the ground. Clubs is having the time of his life, obviously overjoyed to be so close to so much flame. Might want to stand back, you mention casually to the scene as it unfolds in front of you, and tap ash away from the end of your cigarette with a flick of your fingers. Deuce bought like a bale of nitrocellulose last week.

Slick doesn't pause in the tantrum he's throwing at the sight of the Crew's hideout crumbling under the weight of its own destruction, but you jerk your head towards him where he's currently stomping on his hat in a rage, catching Boxcar's eyes. He sighs, but then lumbers over to pick up your mutual hierarchical superior (it's just easier to have an acknowledged leader and fuck knows you don't want the job) and hoist him over to the car, then stuff him inside it. None of the rest of them can save a thing, but you'd moved your best suits outta the crumbling heap days ago. You haven't lost anything that you couldn't afford to lose.

That's not the same for the rest of them, but you don't really care. Exhaling smoke, you flick your cigarette butt to the ground as Slick kicks at the windows of the car and grind it out beneath your foot.

There's a nice place on the other side of town that I've been scoping out, you remark idly, dockside. Hearts grunts to show he's heard you as he gathers up Clubs as well, and the remaining three of you pile into the clunker you've been using for a set of get-away wheels.

Boxcar pretty much sits on Slick in the backseat while Deuce takes the wheel and you slip into the passenger side. You're pretty sure everyone's learned their lesson here, and you feel a warm glow of inner satisfaction as you point the turns out to Deuce, lighting another cigarette to soothe your nerves on the way. All's well that ends well, and all that malarky.

The next hideout, you're not the only one who does some tidying up, but Slick does stab you in the ribshell before you're all moved in. Just so he can feel like he's got the high ground to let bygones be bygones. You figure that's a fair shake of the lamb's tail, so - you let it go (like you always do).

No matter how you break it down, you're a member of the Midnight Crew.

Shame on You, Shame on Me

by blinkfl0yd

Content warnings: *blood, drugs, torture, the usual*

A study in loyalty. (Alternatively: Droog hates this fucking family, but he's the one who chose them in the first place, so really, who's the idiot here?)

I. The Reunion

You don't consider yourself a picky guy (unlike some people), but scrounging for scraps in ruins and scratching sand out of your unmentionables is so far from your style it's almost painful.

It could be worse, you suppose. You could be missing your head, executed by the Queen for treason, or even by the dreamers themselves. Banishment isn't great, but it's better than the alternatives, so you're forcing yourself to grit your teeth and take what you can get. Dwelling on the misfortune of your situation wouldn't do you much good.

Still, the desert seemingly has no plans to show you mercy, so you're forced to get by the best you can. Your fine silks and fabrics are rendered grimy and worthless, so you tear them up and wear them in a way that keeps the sun from your eyes. You conserve water the best you can, keep strict rations. Once you clear one place of its resources, it's pretty much useless, so the trick is to keep moving. It's not ideal, but it's not as if there's anywhere to set up shop.

One thing you appreciated (at least at first) is the quiet. You've been stuck in this place for days now, and you haven't seen hide nor hair of a single living soul save for the odd strange alien bug. It's almost a welcome reprieve from Derse's cesspool of activity, of the miscreants and dimwits that scratched at your door and polluted the outside of your quarters with their mere presence, that gave out noise that disrupted you from your reading

and drowned out the sound of your records.

In that regard, the desert was like an oasis- it contained no sounds except for what's made by yourself and the occasional gust of wind through the dunes and ruins. You miss your records, but other than that it was actually kind of nice, being left alone with nothing but your own thoughts for once. No incessant chattering, no one clogging up your space, no nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

It gets boring fast. You're not sure how many days go past before the quiet becomes almost too loud in it's own right.

It gets worse once you run out of food, out of places to scrounge to get more. Or at least, places that are within your sight. You try to ration what you have the best you can, but it isn't long before you're left with nothing but a rumbling stomach, parched tongue, and slowly decreasing strength that's only being sapped more and more by the heat of the sun.

It's like that for a few days.

You don't remember passing out. You do remember waking up with a pounding headache and a figure hovering above you in your personal space.

After so many days of solitude, your instincts lash out before your more rational brain recognizes the familiar face. By that time it does, though, your fist has already collided with Droll's face.

"Ow!!" Comes his shriek. "*Ow, ow ow ow-!*"

The polite thing to do would be apologize. But seeing Droll is somewhat of a shock- at this stage, you had almost accepted that everyone you had known hadn't survived.

"Droll?" You rasp out, voice strained from an absolutely parched throat, just to check that this isn't some sort of pre-death hallucination.

Somewhere, across the space he had just recently woke up from, there's a

bang.

“The hell’s going on?!” Booms another, deeper, equally familiar voice, and then there’s the Brute, blinking as he realizes you’re awake and breaking out into a smirk that bares all of his teeth. “Well! Looks like Sleepin’ Beauty’s finally up!”

“You’re alive,” you manage, still somewhat

stunned. “Hell yeah I am. The fuck did’ya do to

Droll?”

“I’m okay,” Droll whimpers, despite the blood that’s streaming down from his nose and his voice sounding like he has a cold. Nevertheless, the little gremlin is quick to latch onto him in a full-bodied hug. “I’m just glad you’re okay, DD! We weren’t sure if you were alive either.”

“I apologize, Droll. You startled me.” Apology made, you then attempt to pry him off you. “Now get the hell off before you get blood all over me.”

Brute rolls his eyes. “Charmin’ as ever, Dignitary.” With one massive hand, he grabs Droll by the scruff of his neck, lifts him off with what looks like absolutely no effort, and seats him close to his knee. “C’mon, buddy, let me see your nose-”

“I’m just happy we found you, that’s all!” Droll whines like the man-child he is, wincing as Brute inspects his nose.

“That makes two of us,” you reply, wryly. By now, you’ve managed to take note of, well, everything. The three of you appear to be in some sort of steel bunker, no windows and a small tin door. You’re lying on some sort of pallet, and there’s a pitcher of water next to you that you immediately grab to take a gulpful from, desperate to relieve the aching dryness of your throat.

Droll and Brute are in the same tattered pieces of cloth you are, and look just as disheveled if not worse. “How long have you two been here?”

“Not sure, ” Brute admits, using a stray piece of cloth to wipe at the blood under Droll’s nose, causing the latter to squirm in displeasure. “*Stay still, ya lil’ shit-* Droll and I managed to get out just before the king bit the dust and shit hit

the fan, but there weren't anywhere else to go but here. I was thinkin' we would be able to go back, but-

"That ain't happening," you finish.

"Nope," Brute sighed. "So we've just been kinda millin' about. Jack only found us 'bout a couple weeks ago-"

"Jack's here too?" You ask,

surprised. "Yeah, he should be

back any minute."

Speak of the devil and he'll appear. You witness a somewhat bedraggled Jack Noir stomp into their little bunker, a burlap sack slung over his shoulder and muttering profanities under his breath. He stops as soon as he sees you, and scowls.

"'Bout fucking time you woke up!" He snaps. "The hell took

you so long?!" "Dehydration, most likely," you respond, wryly.

"Oh, stop bitching. Fucking pansy. " He stalks over to you to reach into his sack and

shove a can into your hands. "Here. Eat something so you don't pass out again."

"Good to see you too, Jack," you mutter before inspecting the can. "The

fuck is this?" "Oh shut the fuck up. I'm glad you're not dead in a ditch,

happy?" He tosses a can at

Brute, who catches it with ease "And shit if I know, weird alien gunk I guess." He passes one to Droll, finally noticing his swollen nose. "The fuck happened to you?"

"Don' worry 'bout it," Droll says, nearly impossible to understand through the ever-increasing swelling in the center of his face. "Are you gonna tell D 'bout th' thing?"

"What thing?" You ask. Past experiences cause you to brace yourself, waiting for some sort of half-assed, barely coherent game plan that stands a good

chance of killing you all.

“We’re settin’ up our own colony,” Brute says, cutting off Jack, who glares at him.

“We’re gonna make this place livable-” he gestures to the bunker you’re all currently sitting in. “-scrounge for scraps, that kind of thing- OW!” He clutches his side and glowers at Jack, who hisses at him in response while clutching a fork that he had just poked Brute in the side with.

Brute doesn’t hesitate to use one massive hand to shove Jack clear off the chair, causing Jack to let out a screech as he hits the floor.

Yeah, nothing’s changed. “It’s not a good idea to stay in one place,” you say. “It’s better to keep moving. Once we clear a place of resources, there’s no reason to stay there.”

“Then we’ll eventually drain the whole planet dry,” Jack snaps, crawling back into his chair. Brute bares his teeth at him, causing Jack to sneer back, but otherwise not retaliate. “We need some sort of means to get new resources- food, clothes, and shit. Otherwise we’re gonna fuckin’ die.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

“We started a garden!” Droll pipes up. “It’s really nice, so far!” You stare at them, disbelievingly. “A garden.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

Jack snaps. “You. *Gardening.*”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t even like vegetables. And neither do you,” You add, glancing towards Brute, who just shrugs.

“Well, I ain’t happy about it!” Jack snaps. “But we gotta do something! We can’t just wander around, we actually have to do shit!”

“Do you have any idea how hard growing crops is?” You ask.

“Oh, like *you* would know? You just don’t want to do any work, you lazy piece of shit!” “I’m just saying, it’ll be easier if we just get our food from what’s already there, it’s pointless to go to all that effort-”

“Well, that ain’t what we’re doing!” Jack snaps. “We took a vote, and we all want to do this-” At that, both Brute and Droll nod. “So shut the fuck up, and eat your shit.”

“Also, our gardens are pretty,” Droll adds, seriously.

The only thing you can do in response is roll your eyes, and pop the can open with your fingernail.

II. One Example (Out Of Many) Of Fucking Up

You were both young when you first met Jack Noir.

You’ve known him since the beginning, having started work under the monarchy at nearly the exact same time. Despite being, in your personal, humble opinion, the more intelligent of the two, you were assigned as his subordinate. Looking back, it was pretty much downhill from there.

He was short. Angry. Stabbed you a lot. Made you do work you didn’t particularly want to do. He yelled at you, cussed you out, ranted at you about everything (mostly the Queen) dragged you into his demented little world and made you into the first member of his personal Crew.

You’ve been at his side ever since.

You probably will be for the rest of your life, until either he drives you to insanity or you finally snap and strangle him.

Of course, he isn't Jack Noir now. He's Spades Slick, boss of the Midnight Crew and the undisputed king of the city. Still your boss, technically, and you still refer to him as such, but somehow...it's a bit different. There's not a lot of folks left who remember the short, grumbly, put-upon agent from Derse, bullied relentlessly by the Queen at every turn and having no power to do anything but take his frustration out on his subordinates and brood relentlessly over his hatred for the monarchy.

But you remember. Because in a lot of ways, he's still the same person. And you would know- you know him better than anyone. You've been dealing with his crap for years now, of course you would fucking know.

He'll always be Jack Noir to you, no matter what name he chooses to go by. And you think that there's a part of him that knows it. It gives you a measure of power that you can hold over him, because on a certain level, you know him better than anyone else.

You have more power than him, in a way. Sometimes you think about overthrowing him. Not the act itself, or the actions you would have to take to achieve this, but sitting in his position. Being actually recognized as the smartest person in the room, for once, being acknowledged as the one who holds the real power in the city.

You know him. You know the rest of his crew. You know his city, his world, how everything around them ticks. Maybe better than he does.

You're the one that really holds the power in the Midnight Crew, and especially in your relationship with Spades Slick and the rest of them.

The sound of a door slamming jerks you away from your newspaper. You're leaning against the outside wall of a small shed in the backyard of one Curmudgeonly Magistrate- known in some circles as the Corrupt Malefactor, a somewhat prominent figure who has *very* valuable information that is critical to the preservation of the Crew's operation. Said Malefactor is currently in the shed, courtesy of Deuce's efforts. The door slams so hard that the tin walls rattle, and you already know who it is before you glance up to see Slick

storming into your personal space. He's covered in blood, knife in hand, and he looks more pissed than usual.

"Your turn to deal with the coffin-stuffer," he spits out, jerking a thumb towards the shed. From inside, you can hear the faint sounds of Malefactor whimpering, and other pathetic noises.

"Can't make him talk?" You fold your newspaper neatly, before stowing it away. "I'm surprised, I would think this would be a cakewalk for you."

"Yeah, well, you try to get anything out of the fucker," he spits out, before stalking back towards the main house.

"And where the hell are you going?" You call after him.

"To see for myself if there's anything in his stupid office!" "I thought Hearts and Clubs were taking care of that!"

"Fuck off!" Is his final response before he's gone.

You roll your eyes. Interrogation has never been one of Slick's stronger suits- he tends to kill them too quickly, be too heavy-handed in his methods.

Yet another instance that needs your more delicate touch.

III. The Aftermath of Getting Fucking Turnt

"Th' particles... the' particelth... they're spinnin'!"

You pinch the bridge of your nose. In the distance, you can hear Deuce make more retching noises, muffled due to him being trapped in his chest of drawers in the other room. You had even duct-taped it shut so that he couldn't get out. Harsh, maybe, but those were the consequences for puking on your suits.

“They’re spinning, Droog! Y’think they have somewhere t’piss when they want- wait, whaddya doin’-?”

You proceed to shove one of the couch pillows over Slick’s face. He lets out a series of muffled shrieks, swear words. It’s a testament to how thoroughly stoned he is that he doesn’t even reach for one of his knives- just flails like a fucking fish until he slowly goes limp.

After tossing the pillow to the side, you hold a finger under his nose to check that he’s still breathing- he is, to your mild disappointment- before rolling him over on his side to make sure he doesn’t do something disgusting like choke on his own vomit or something.

“Guys?” Comes Club’s muffled, whiny voice from the other room. “Guys, are you there?
It’s dark!”

“Go to sleep, Clubs,” you call through
gritted teeth. A pause. A meek “Okay,” is
his only response.

From the opposite room, there’s a
crashing sound. “CLUBS!!” Comes a
panicked bellow.

Oh for the love of-

Boxcars stumbles in with all the grace of a drunken, brain-damaged ox (which, to some extent, he is), eyes wide and rimmed with red.

“WHERE’S CLUBS?!!” He shrieks, voice going high enough to make you jump.

“He’s...” you’re somewhat taken aback, mainly because you’ve known him

for god knows how long, and you had no idea his voice could go that high. Learn something new every day, you suppose. “He’s sleeping. He’ll come out in the morning. Go back to bed.”

“Hearts?” Comes another pathetic whine from the other room.

“CLUBS?!! WHERE ARE YOU BUDDY?!!” Boxcars looks around wildly, scanning the room, before gasping. “Wait. ARE YOU IN THE WALLS-?!”

Oh no. “Do NOT-”

Too late. With a mighty howl, Boxcars swings his fist as hard as he can. The drywall immediately splinters under the blow, and the whole wall shakes.

“CLUBS!!” Boxcars shrieks. “I’M COMIN’ FER YA, BUDDY!”

You stand. Pick up your newspaper, fold it neatly under your arm, and leave as there’s another sound of a hole being punched into your wall. You’ve officially reached your limit for the night, and you’re retiring. If Boxcars breaks down your door, you will gladly use that as an excuse to murder him.

The next morning when you emerge, literally everything is broken. Every. Fucking. Thing. You gracefully step over pieces of shattered furniture, broken glass, torn up carpet, bits of wood and drywall. On the floor of the kitchen are your comrades, sitting in a circle with what looks like food salvaged from the very crushed refrigerator that looks like it had a two-ton tank dropped on it. Meaning, it had lost a fight with Boxcars.

“Now,” you say, a bit louder than necessary. You would never admit how much satisfaction you get from watching all three of them cringe at the noise. “What have we learned?”

“Fuck off,” Boxcars groans, as Slick snarls and chucks a knife at you, one that you easily

dodge. heads.

“What have we learned?” You repeat, even louder, causing them all to groan, clutch their

“Don’t-” Deuce whimpers. “Don’t eat the brownies that taste funny.” “Or?”

“Or drink the punch that tastes weirder than usual.”

“Or?”

“Or both.”

You give a nod of approval, before heading out the door with the intention of picking up a pastry for your breakfast, whistling along the way. You’re just looking on the bright side- that at least now you have an excuse to remodel the hideout in the way you’ve wanted it for years, which actually makes you fairly pleased.

IV. One Example (Out Of Many) Of Fucking Up (Part Two)

Two hours later, you storm out of the shed in a foul mood, toweling off bits of

Malefactor’s guts off of your hands with a handkerchief. You’re met with the rest of your Crew standing outside- Boxcars and Slick are bickering, with Deuce watching solemnly from where he’s perched on a rock, legs swinging underneath him.

“Get him to crack?” Slick barks at you as soon as he sees that you’ve emerged.

“No,” you spit out, throwing the handkerchief on the ground- it’s ruined anyway, you have no use for it. “It’s like he genuinely has no idea.”

“Great!” Slick throws his hands in the air. “And since somebody-” he

glowers at Boxcars. “-didn’t find shit-”

“Aw, put a sock innit!” Boxcars growls. “Ya didn’t find
shit either!” “OH, FUCK YOU-”

“Something’s not right here,” You cut in, because as entertaining as it
sometimes is, watching Tweedledum and Tweedledumber get into a brawl is
something you are not in the mood for. “Malefactor should have cracked. It’s
like he really doesn’t know shit-”

“Wait, *Malefactor?*” Deuce pipes up,
blinking at you. “Yes. The Malefactor.”

“Not the Banker?”

Slowly, steadily, all three of you turn to stare at him.

“Yeah, the Malefactor,” Boxcars says, slowly. “The Curmudgeonly
Malefactor. That’s the guy that’s tryin’ to get us, Deuce. The Curmudgeonly
Banker is his brother. I told ya this, remember?”

“Oh!” Deuce exclaims. “*Oh*. You wanted the
Malefactor...” You all continue to stare at him.

“That’s the Banker in there, isn’t it?” Slick says flatly, pointing
at the shed. Deuce looks guiltily at his feet. “Yeah, sorry, I got
‘em mixed up.”

Slick throws his hands in the air. “FOR FUCK’S SAKE!”

“Wait, I thought ya left the Banker in the basement!” Boxcars looks
panicked.

“No, that was the Malefactor.”

“Okay, well get the Malefactor!” Slick snaps.

“Uh...” Now it’s Boxcars looking guilty. “No can do, boss.” “Why the fuck not?”

“I kinda ate him.”

Another pause.

“You ate him,” You repeat, coolly. “You fucking. Ate him.”

At that point, Slick launches himself at Boxcars, fists flying and screeching. “WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU DO THAT-”

“I WAS HUNGRY, OKAY?!”

“AND NEITHER OF YOU FUCKING NOTICED IT WAS THE WRONG FUCKING GUY?!!”

“OF COURSE I DIDN’T FUCKIN’ NOTICE!! THEY’RE IDENTICAL”

“Well, we’re fucked,” you groan to yourself.

You notice Deuce makes a motion like he wants to comfort you, but, in the wisest move he’s done all fucking night, notices your expression and takes a step back instead.

(You weren’t fucked, at least, not completely. Through a series of shenanigans including dressing in drag, buying a pig, and Boxcars using his love for gospel music to serenade a bull, the Midnight Crew lived to fight another day. Not before you gained several gray hairs and lost at least a century of your life, though.)

V. The Heist Where Everything Went Wrong

“Fuck!”

The sound is more like a gurgle than anything else. When you glance in your rearview mirror, you see Slick hack up what looks like another mouthful of blood. You have no idea how much he’s lost at this point, he’s probably already lost enough through his guts practically hanging out of him, despite Deuce’s visibly frantic efforts in keeping them in. The sight makes you grip on the steering wheel.

“Where’s that fucking first aid kit?!” You snap towards the direction behind you.

“I’M FUCKIN’ LOOKIN’!” Boxcars’ voice snaps back, and sure enough, you continue hearing rummaging, objects being thrown aside.

“How are you still looking?! You’re the one that organizes

the van!!” “I KNOW! I’M SORRY, OKAY?!”

You’re going to kill him. And also Slick, for stupidly insisting on chasing after Kingpin. For Deuce, for getting distracted by lesser mooks and not being there with his bombs like he was supposed to be. You’re going to kill all of them, because you *swear* that you’re losing years off your life as you speak.

“Gonna kill that motherfucker...” You hear Slick slur. “Gonna fuckin’ gut him an’ make him eat his liver and shove ‘im in a lil’ tiny boxy and stomp on it ‘till it explodes-”

“Shut up, Slick!” You growl. “Deuce, tell him to shut up.”

“Shut up, boss,” Deuce murmurs to him in the kindest possible tone, only to him to yelp as Slick...does something to retaliate, you’re not sure, you’re too busy focusing on the road, and that’s not important right now.

“Dammit Deuce, keep him still! He’s gonna lose too much blood.”

“GOT IT!!!” You hear Boxcars scramble around in the back, the sound of a case opening. “Boss, ya gotta roll over for a second-”

Your grip is so tight on the steering wheel that you wouldn’t be surprised if your bones cracked.

VI. The Reunion (Part Two)

The heat of the desert is sweltering, even at night, but you relish in the smell of nicotine and the smoke swirling around you. Turns out Jack had found a package of alien cigarettes while scavenging, and seems to have kept some for you. He hadn’t technically known you were alive yet, but apparently he wasn’t worried. He’d known that you would “drag your ass back” eventually, which was strangely encouraging.

The cigarettes are slightly different from what you’re used to on Derse, but nicotine is nicotine and you haven’t had any in days. You get lightheaded from your first puff, but it’s all worth it once you start to feel it in your system. You sigh, content, happier than you’ve been in weeks.

“You look happy. That’s a first; glad I saved those cigarettes.”

As he speaks, Jack climbs out from the bunker’s hatch, maneuvers himself out and up to stand next to you.

“You didn’t even know I was alive,” you say. “I’m touched.” He tchs. “I knew you weren’t dead.”

“How?”

“Just knew,” was his only response.

You send him a quizzical look, but he doesn't elaborate. You go ahead and resume your study of the stars above you.

"This doesn't mean I'm happy about building a fucking compound from scratch," you point out.

"Oh, stop bitching," Slick snaps. "You just don't want to do the work." You snort. "You'd be lucky to get anything done without me."

"Wow, and here I fucking thought you'd be a bit more humble now that our fucking world is gone."

"Please, I'm sure you're glad I stayed." "You know, you don't fucking have to."

You're not sure you heard right. You turn to stare at him, but he's not looking at you.

"If you don't want to be here, you could just leave." He shoots you a glare that lasts only a millisecond before he's glowering down at his feet again.

You've never been more thunderstruck in your life.

VII. The Heist Where Everything Went Wrong (Part Two)

Would it come down to it, you would go to your deathbed swearing that you aren't afraid of needles.

And you aren't. *Really*. There's a difference between dislike, and being afraid. You just very, *very* strongly dislike needles. There's a distinct difference.

Which you're very calmly trying to explain to this stupid nurse who's *insisting* on sticking one of those sharp, pointy hellpieces into you.

"Sir, it's not a bad thing to be scared-"

"Again. I am not. Scared," you repeat, as calmly as you can considering the circumstances, with a dippy broad trying to poke and prod at you and your boss possibly dying in the other room. Really, you think you're doing well just by resisting your urge to murder the woman on the spot, though by the way Boxcars is forcibly restraining you it wouldn't be obvious. "I just don't understand why you need my blood."

"We just need to know your blood type, sir, that's all! It's just one little prick, and then you're done." At least she looks nervous. Earlier, she had been talking to you like you were a child, and it was doing nothing but making your blood *boil*.

"You don't *need* to know my blood type. You *need* to be attending to our colleague-" "I can't, I need to get your blood type-"

"I know my blood type!" Deuce chimes in, despite looking nervously at the needle in the nurse's hand. "So you don't need to prick me like DD. So. Don't prick me, okay?"

"Good job, Deuce," Boxcars tell him, somewhat offhand.

"Are you A-positive?" The nurse asks, turning her attention to Deuce.

"Uh-huh," Deuce replies, looking bewildered. "Wait, how did you know?" "Excellent! Then we can take you in the back and draw your blood-"

Deuce freezes. "Wait, what?"

"For your friend," The nurse adds. "See, he's lost a lot of blood, so we need someone to donate. That's why I was asking for your blood type, Mister...Droog."

All three of you stare at her for a good, long minute.

“Why the fuck,” you begin slowly, calmly, past the bells and whistles of *utter fucking rage* going off in your head. “Did you not say that to begin with?”

“I’ll go,” Deuce squeaks out, quickly, as the nurse shrinks back in terror. “I’ll do it.”

“You hate needles,” you remind him.

“But it’s for the boss.” There’s a string of bravado in his tone, which definitely contrasts with him visibly shaking. “I- I don’t want him to die...”

“Well, excellent.” The nurse takes a hesitant step forward, casting nervous glances at you. “We’ll just take you into the back, and draw your blood-”

“Is it going to hurt?” Deuce asks, voice small. He looks deathly pale, like he’s about to faint, as she comes closer. Because unlike you, he is absolutely, positively *terrified* of needles.

“Well. Yes, a little-”

“Oh for god’s sake, go ahead and test me.” You glower down at her, enough until she backs away from Deuce. “I’m likely a match, I’ve given blood to him before. Test me just in case, but go ahead and use my blood.”

“I’ll have to test your blood-”

“I know, that’s why I’m *telling* you to test my *goddamn blood*-”

“You sure, DD?” You hear Boxcars mutter to you. You ignore him.

“Well. Okay.” The nurse gestures for you to follow her, looking hesitant. “Come with me, please.”

You obey. You hear Boxcars and Deuce shuffling after you, and when you turn to glance at them, Boxcars gives you a thumbs up.

You're led to a chair, and instructed to sit down, wrap a strap around your arm, the likes.

As the nurse pokes for a needle, Deuce clings to your arm,

eyes shining. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," he

chants to you reverently.

"Get off." You shake him off, if only so you can better concentrate on not flinching when the nurse sinks a needle into your skin, of forcing back your instinct to recoil and shove her into the wall.

Nearly seven hours later, Spades is drugged up and groggy in a hospital bed, too loopy to even shove Deuce off of him when the little gremlin clings to him and cries tears of relief, but he's alive. Knowing him, he'll probably be prickly and annoyed when you force him to rest when he inevitably tries to get out of bed within the next few days. All's right with the world, despite the soreness in your arm.

VIII. The Reunion (Part Three)

The heat of the desert is sweltering, and only emphasizes the tension you feel emulating from Jack as he glowers down at his feet.

"Where the hell did this come from?" You finally ask. "Where else would I go?"

"Why should I know? It would be up to you." He sounds like a petulant child. It's almost pathetic. "S'not like I can order you around anywhere. Or to stay in the first place."

Ah, you think, then.

You regard him, for a second. Take in the way he's glowering down at the ground, seemingly unable to look at you. He wears no uniform, no Archagent badge, nothing that designates him as your superior. It's certainly a dynamic change. No wonder he's moody.

On a professional basis, you have no more duty towards him, no sense of obligation.

Those all died along with Derse as you knew it.

There's no boundaries that tie you to him, now, and you both know it. If you want to leave, to do what you want, there would be no legal consequences.

Though it's not like you didn't already do what you wanted, before, a voice in your head reminds you.

You try to imagine yourself on your own, just like you had been in the past several weeks. Try to imagine yourself forming a crew of your own, finding virtual strangers on a wrecked desert planet to follow you, being at your beck and call.

You try to imagine walking away for good. Leaving Jack, Droll, and Brute behind, forever.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He blinks at you, looking startled.

"C'mon." You stub out your cigarette, put it neatly back in the folds of your rags for later use. "We've left Droll to his own devices for too long. I'd rather not let anything catch fire."

"Wait- really?" He looks genuinely surprised. "You're staying?"

You give him your most stoic, aloof look of stoicness. "The Crew's finally back together, Boss. Why would I leave now?"

It's the use of his old title of *Boss* that visibly perks him up, just like you knew it would. His face breaks out into a toothy cross between a sneer and a smirk. "Fucking *pansy*. What, you wanna make friendship bracelets? Get matching t-shirts proclaiming our magical fucking friendship?"

You smirk. “Sure. I’ll go tell Droll, I’m sure he’ll make you *all* the bracelets.”

You get to experience the pleasure of Jack Noir shifting from smug to visibly horrified. “Oh, *don’t you fucking dare-*”

From inside the bunker sounds a rather loud *BOOM!* The sound makes you both whip around, and Jack’s face contorts with utter rage.

“That little shit-” He snarls, taking off like a shot back down into the bunker. *“DROLL IF YOU BLEW UP THE PLANTS I SWEAR-!!”*

You sigh. *And here we go.*

Back with your companions, who are back on their bullshit, once again. How foolish of you to think you would ever escape.

Foolish to think you would ever choose to.

IX. The Hard Truth

You’re the one that holds the real power within the Midnight Crew. At least, that’s what you tell yourself.

X. 3AM

Slick’s still groggy from the pain meds by the time you all manage to get him back to the hideout, and he almost immediately crashes out on Boxcars on the couch.

Somehow that ends up with all four of you on the couch. You don’t like Boxcars’ soap operas by any means, but after the day you’ve had, some mindless drivel and drama doesn’t feel like it would be the worst thing in the world. It gives

you an excuse to nap, at least.

Then the next thing you know, you're waking up with your head resting on Boxcars' free shoulder, the one not occupied by Slick. And resting on you is Deuce, likewise totally dead to the world.

Still somewhat groggy from sleep, you shift him enough that he isn't drooling on your suit, and he doesn't even stir. He continues to doze blissfully, completely unaware that he's turned you into a living pillow. He probably wouldn't even mind if he was aware, you realize, with some exasperation.

"Don't wake him up," Boxcar's voice rumbles softly. He sounds just about awake as you are, tone audibly tired and words somewhat slurred around the edges.

"I'm not," you grumble. "Just making sure he doesn't drool on me." "Yeah, yeah."

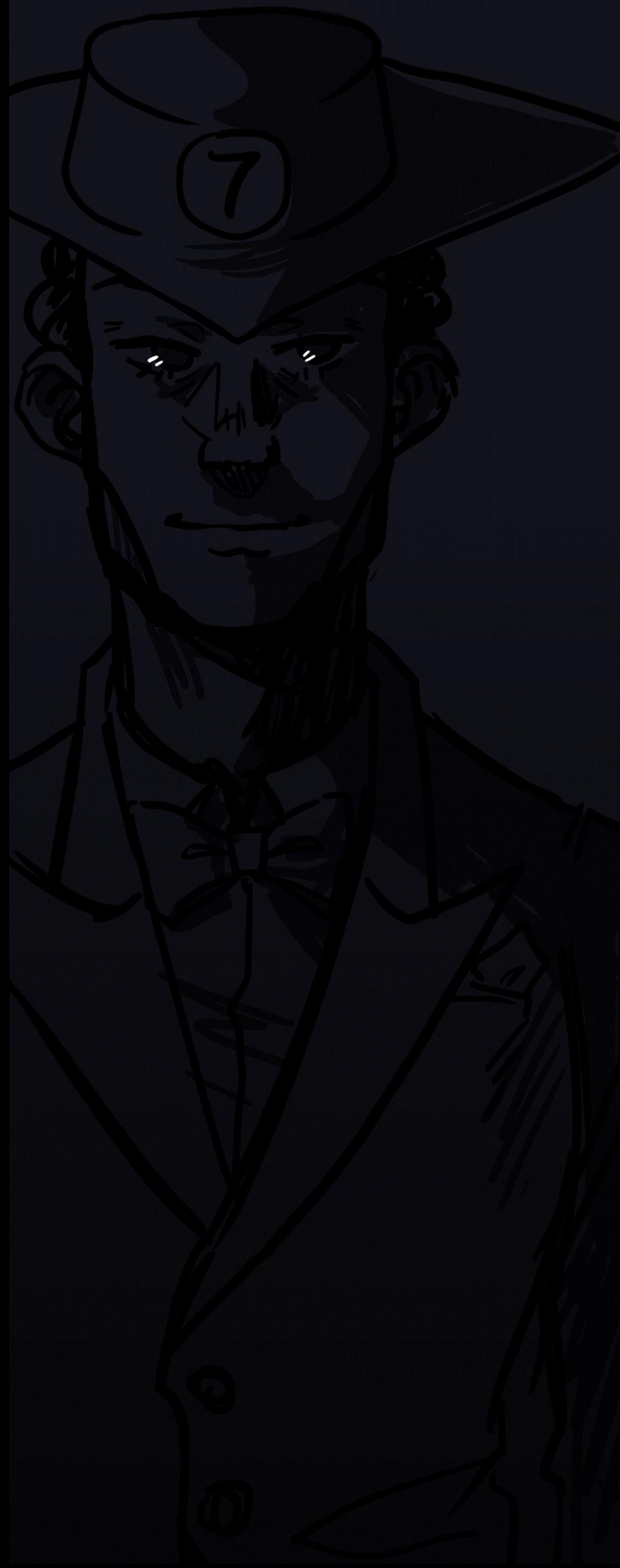
Oversized knuckles give you a fairly light noogie, by Boxcars' standards. Were you Slick, you would probably snarl and try to bite him- in your half-awake state, you almost do. There would be no point, though, because by the time they're gone, Boxcars has already gone back to snoring.

There's no way you're *not* going to wake up tomorrow with a kink in your back. You know this for a very solid fact, if only because the hideous couch that both Boxcars and Deuce utterly refuse to part with is horrifically uncomfortable. But with Deuce's stupid noggin on your chest, and your own stupid self up against Boxcars, there's not fucking way you're going to be able to move anytime soon.

So, like you've done for all your life, you resign yourself to your fate. You let your eyes slide back closed, and it's not long before you've drifted off to sleep, the sound of snoring all around you.

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doubled-clubs - 38, 39
eelmoji -- 11
fang11803 - 17
fletcher-png - 37, 41
flurryarts - 32
galactiwitch - 19, 25
glassesblu - 24
KeyMaster -- 12
MAVLOTOV - 18
mirmirart -- 31
modwario - 16
mokentosh - 5
peskaroo -- 22
purpledemoncat - 36
radzcatz - 26
retroscofflaws - 43
selanpike - 9
spaced-out-xandy - 6
spektorrose - 40
stabbedslick - 34
tastelessgelatin - 30
tenacIty - 20
themonsterghost - 10
venoumoussnakez - 42
wachtelspinat - 44
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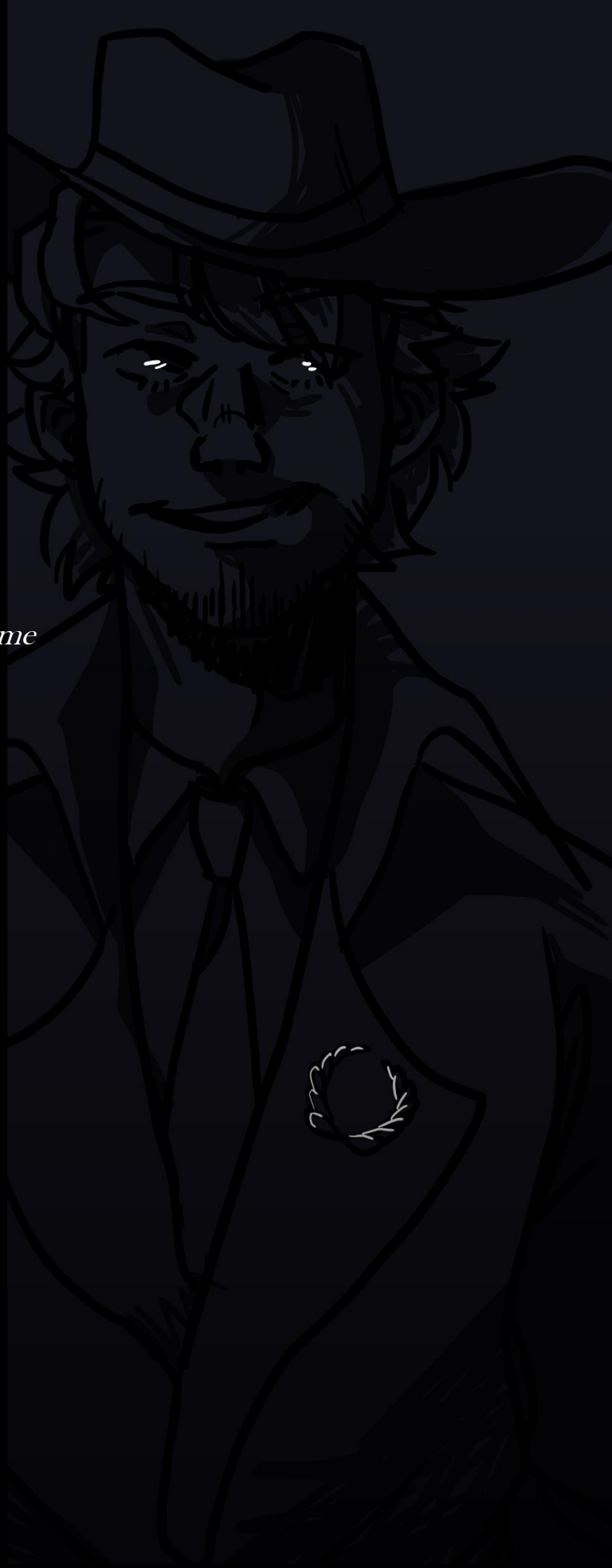
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That's Why You Remember the Name
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The Felt - The Narrative's at Play
Misplaced in Purpose
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Thank you!

— from the [ECLIPSE] team ♡